# THE BODY ON THE FLOOR

NANCY B. MAVITY

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## *This is the Story*

"SUICIDE," said the chief of police, and the Coroner agreed with him. So did the great criminological expert engaged by the defence. But Peter Piper, the whistling reporter whose psychological hucches had solved the Tule Marsh Murder case, thought differently.

The woman who lay dead on the floor could have killed herself—according to the evidence she probably did—but would a woman planning suicide send her dress to the cleaner's?

The answer revealed one of the strangest scandals and most amazing crimes of the century.



*By the Same Author*

THE TULE MARSH MURDER

# THE BODY ON THE FLOOR

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TO

LEO S. LEVY

with gratitude and affection

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*The Body on the Floor* is purely a work of fiction. Although some of the incidents were suggested by actual occurrences, the characters and the development of the action are entirely imaginary.

# CHAPTER I

"WHAT this office needs," said Peter Piper, "is a good gory murder."

The words were almost swallowed in a gurgle as he yawned cavernously and extended his arms in a mighty stretch, regardless of the precarious balance of his chair, which tilted on its hind legs against the wall behind him.

"Nize baby, wrote opp all de murders," Agnew, the "freak" rewrite man, quoted, thrusting out a foot which brought Peter's chair with a clatter to an upright position on the floor.

"Have a heart!" Peter groaned. "I didn't say I wanted to be the corpse. But what have you? This place is so dead that Jimmy sent me out to interview an old dame whose sole claim to distinction was living a hundred and five years. She was stone deaf. All the papers have run a story on her every year for the last five, and the grand advice and philosophy they did hand out! All she says is 'Hey,' so there's a free field left for the imagination. I had her take back all the advice the other papers invented for her and say she'd had a change of heart, growing with the times. That ought to hold 'em for a while. But never again! One more old lady would be my finish. I don't mind 'em when they're just dumb, but when they're deaf—well, it's hard on the voice of a pore young reporter. I'm going to charge up a box of throat lozenges on my expense account."

"Bigger and better murders—our slogan," the water-front man chimed in. "We might start a department like the 'Most Embarrassing Moment.' Commit a murder and win a dollar."

"Gawdlemighty!" groaned Smith, who conducted

the " most embarrassing moment " feature. " Haven't I got enough woe? Imagine my embarrassment when the corpse recovered and I had to return the dollar."

" Well, make it like a baby show, then," the waterfront man insisted. " Say, the circulation department ought to give me a bonus or something for that idea. No murders accepted unless accompanied by two paid subscriptions to the *Herald*. Cash prize for the cutest crime. Ribbons for the runners-up."

" Make it ropes—more appropriate than ribbons," Peter grunted.

" You should complain about things being dead!" Agnew leaned back and turned to Peter, clasping his hands behind his head. " Didn't you go out yesterday and bring back a Page One story from that inquest on nine suicides at once? How do you want your stiffs—in job lots?"

But Peter's long face remained glum.

" I didn't ask for 'em to be laid out in rows," he protested mildly. " Two days ago I'd have been quite content without any murder at all. A bank robbery would have done nicely. But if I have to sit around here many more days without anything more enlivening than the Old Ladies' Home, I'll throw a typewriter at somebody, just to break the silence."

Agnew squinted across his desk at Peter, then leaned briskly forward and inserted a sheet of copy paper into his typewriter. For a moment his fingers tap-tapped busily at the keys. Then he ripped the sheet out and tossed it on Peter's desk.

FEATURE WRITER MASHES FEATURES

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BASHES SKULL OF CITY EDITOR WITH WILD MACHINE

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REPORTER RUNS AMUCK
BLAMES ENNUI

Peter's bright gray eyes gleamed with appreciative laughter. Deftly he rolled a spitball and flung it in the general direction of the rewrite man. It missed its mark, pinged against the eyeshade of Jimmy, the city editor, and dropped to the desk.

" Hey, you kids!" Jimmy grunted. " Is all this horse-play strictly necessary?"

It was the slack hour between editions in the local room of the *Herald*. A slack hour in a slack week which had shredded Jimmy's nerves to irascibility.

" Not a local front page picture in a carload," he grunted, slamming a sheaf of glazed photographs into the wire basket for the " morgue." " My Aunt Maria! If I saw a bang-up story that hailed from any place nearer than Chicago I'd faint. Piper!"

Peter disentwined his long legs from the rungs of his chair, which crashed forward as he slouched across the open space separating his desk from that of the city editor. On the way he turned his head and with the fingers of one hand made an exceedingly impolite gesture in the direction of the rewrite man, who affected an elaborate unconcern.

" Now see what you've done," he groaned. " Gone and woke up the dogs of war. He was all nice and content with a cross-word puzzle five minutes ago."

" You might take a camera man out and see what you can make of this coed elopement," Jimmy said as Peter leaned over the desk.

Peter struck a dramatic attitude arms outflung.

" And has it come to this!" he moaned tragically.

" It has," Jimmy assured him grimly. " We gotta get something to keep our well-known thousands of readers from suspecting that our reporters haven't anything to do but throw spitballs. Maybe you can fluff it up and make something of it at that. Boy!"

At the familiar bellow one of the boys lolling on a bench against the local room wall detached himself.

" Go and see if Andrews is in the dark room and tell him to come here." His eyes still following the leisurely

exit of the copy boy, Jimmy reached out for a telegram thrust under his nose by a messenger, signed for it, and inattentively ripped open the envelope. "If that kid correspondent at Medbury wastes any more telegraph tolls on golden weddings he's going to be out of a job," he muttered irritably.

Peter saw Jimmy's hands suddenly tighten on the edges of the telegraph blank. After an instant of immobility he flung the yellow slip violently from him, letting it flutter to the floor.

"My—Aunt—Maria!" he said with slow intensity, shaking both fists above his head.

Peter stooped to pick up the crumpled sheet of paper.

"Piper!" Jimmy's voice was a raucous shout. Peter knew it as Jimmy's clarion call to action. Before he could rise into view from his stooped position in front of the city editor's desk, it came again, a shout of angry, joyous impatience. "Piper! Where the 'ell——?"

"Right here—within earshot," Peter drawled; but before he had regained his feet he had extracted a black copy pencil and a sheet of folded paper from his pocket, ready to take notes.

"Gimme that wire," Jimmy barked. "Woman found shot through the head in the kitchen of a ranch house near Medbury. Might have been either suicide or murder. That cub correspondent Jerry Dean sends us a hundred words on it—a hundred—words——" Jimmy's voice dropped to a whisper of awe at the ways of country correspondents. "And in that hundred he tells us privately—privately, mind you—that the woman, who has been known as a Mrs. Asbury, is the estranged wife of Cole, the tyre king of Detroit. And he hopes we'll spare the family any publicity."

Peter leaned forward, shamelessly reading the telegram upside down. He said nothing, but his wide, mobile lips puckered, and from them issued a wailing minor whistle.

"Hoo—oo, hoo-oo-oo-oo," intoned Peter. It was his own particular battle cry.

" That's a happy little thought," he droned. " And while we're politely saying nothing, what does Dean think the morning papers wil be doing, I ask it?"

" You bet you'll ask it," Jimmy snapped. " And you'll ask a lot more before you're through. There's more in this than meets the eye. A hundred words—can you beat that?" Jimmy lapsed into a moment's silence of sheer astonishment.

" Dean's an infant—hasn't scratched yet. But he's not so dumb. He must have known he had a big story," Peter ventured.

" You bet he knew it! He knew it, and he had the crazy idea he could cover it up. That means he had a reason for wanting to cover it up. And that means he's next to something. The other papers will find out who she is soon enough, of course. But the angels only know what exclusive information he may have and try to hide under his belt. Gosh, what I do have to put up with! But it has points. It sure—has—points." Jimmy sat staring into space for five seconds, assembling those invisible " points." Then he thrust his eye shade back until his rusty hair outcropped in a ragged halo above the green celluloid visor.

" How soon can you start for Medbury?"

" Five minutes," Peter answered glibly.

" Why the delay?"

" Well, for one thing, I've got to let Barbara know I'm not plugged full of lead or something——"

" Marian!" Jimmy interrupted, calling across the room to the girl at the telephone switchboard. " Get Mr. Piper's house and tell his wife he won't be home for an indefinite period. Tell her I'm a brute and it's all my fault."

" And for another thing," Peter considered imperturbably, " I don't risk landing in any town, any time, without a toothbrush."

But Jimmy was already scribbling on an expense account blank snatched from the pad before him.

" Boy! Beat it down to the cashier and get this

money. Then go across to the drugstore and buy this Beau Brummel a toothbrush. He'll meet you at the parking lot."

"And the coed elopement?" Peter grinned.

"We'll let somebody else handle it." Jimmy's excitement was deaf to sarcasm. "Something tells me," he said in the tone of a devotee kneeling in gratitude before a shrine, "that this is going to be a whale of a yarn. Get busy on it!"

"As Peter loped across the open space between the desks the rewrite man reached out a long leg to trip his progress.

"What's all the shooting about?" he asked eagerly.

"You've guessed it—shooting's the word," Peter answered over his shoulder. "And I don't know what it's about, but I'm going to make one grand stab at finding out."

## CHAPTER II

I DON'T believe you're really a fool." The half quizzical and wholly friendly smile twisting Peter's flexible lips robbed the words of offence.

"Don't you? I'm not so sure."

It was the trial of Jerry Dean's life that he blushed on the slightest provocation. He felt the telltale heat mount from his cheeks to his forehead now, but his wide-set blue eyes met Peter's steadily.

At the moment, Peter looked as little as possible like a man who had been twirling his battered car for three hours around mountain curves with a warning squawk of the horn and a complete disregard of speed limits. His preposterously long legs, usually twined about the rungs of a chair or hunched up at an acute angle, were stretched full length on the hotel bed, where he lay with an elbow crooked behind his head, scattering ashes over the white spread. He was the picture of a young man

with nothing to do, and doing it. Yet Jimmy, who was frequently called the slave driver by members of the *Herald* staff, if he had looked in on the scene, would not have accused Peter of wasting his time. Jimmy knew his Peter.

Peter's first act after checking in at Medbury's one hotel had been to send for Jerry Dean. Jerry had already been the recipient of a long-distance telephone call from the city editor of the *Herald,* and the tone of that brief but sulphurous message left him unprepared for the gentleness of Peter's welcome.

" I suppose I'm fired," were Jerry's first words when, in answer to Peter's shouted " Come in," he stood within the room, one hand still on the door knob behind him. He had tried hard to make the words sound casual, but his own ears caught the quaver in his voice. To make up for that quaver he faced Peter with a defiant stare—a defiance, if he had but known it, which made him look ludicrously like a small boy summoned to the woodshed for a parental whipping.

" Not yet," Peter said non-committally, without stirring from his recumbent position on the bed. And then Peter had smiled—a smile that bisected his long thin face and irradiated his bright, nearsighted gray eyes. Defiance melted before that smile.

He waved the hand holding his pipe toward the only arm-chair in the room, peppering the bed with ashes as he did so.

" Jimmy can't afford to fire you at the moment," he assured Jerry. " You're a mine of something-or-other, and we prefer to keep our exclusive information in the *Herald* family." Again his smile obliterated the cynicism of his words. He looked across the room at Jerry as if they were two small boys conspiring against the adult world.

" But Mr. Sears said——" Jerry ventured uncertainly.

" Quite." Peter affected Anglicisms when he was not affecting alley slang. " Jimmy's a good egg," he said

emphatically, punctuating the air with his pipe, which responded with a shower of sparks. " A taste for Jimmy is like a taste for Limburger cheese. You have to get used to his bite. But, believe me, you Bon Ami infant, it's jolly well worth while to be a Jimmy connoisseur."

"Bon Ami——?" Jerry's round ingenuous face showed a comical bewilderment.

" Precisely. Hasn't scratched yet. But something tells me you're going to chip out of the eggshell before we're through with this."

Jerry flushed again. Gazing meditatively through the fog of tobacco smoke, Peter studied the face before him —a ruddy blond face, looking younger than its twenty years; shy and dreamy blue eyes under their short blond lashes conflicting with a short, stubborn nose and a sensitive, determined mouth.

" This is my first job, you know," Jerry blurted after a silence, looking carefully away from Peter and fixing his gaze on a knob of the chiffonier. " I wanted to make good in it. But "—the blue eyes suddenly blazed straight into Peter's and a fist crashed down on the chair arm—" I wish to God a woman could die and be buried without the whole country turning like a pack of hounds to tear—other people—to pieces!"

Peter disregarded the choking vehemence of Jerry's protest.

" And did you really think," he said with elaborate reasonableness, " that a perfectly good mysterious bumping off, involving the wife of a millionaire who had lived under an assumed name, could be disposed of—casually?"

" I suppose not," Jerry agreed miserably. " That's why I guess I really am a fool."

" No, you just lost your head a bit—let your emotions override your commonsense. You know the family?" The words dropped quickly, lightly.

" I know the daughter. She's nothing but a girl—awfully young."

Peter clamped his teeth tightly over his pipe stem to

hide a smile at Jerry's describing some one else as awfully young."

"She asked me to do what I could—to keep it quiet," Jerry continued.

"She's—afraid?"

"No!" The word was a single sharp explosion. "But it's the horror of it. After all these years. What years they were—for a child! And then, to have it all dragged into the open—like this—now." Jerry's phrases fell in a series of disconnected jerks. His thick fair eyebrows were drawn together in a frown of pain. "The sheer ultimate horror of it!" he said again.

"Well, it happened," Peter reminded him. "You can't undo that objective fact, you know."

"But I could keep out of it—I needn't be the one to drag it into the light, to make a Roman holiday. I could do that much, if it did cost me my job."

"Sometimes the light isn't such a bad therapeutic agent—provided we can get it." Peter's voice was very patient. "And maybe you can help most from the inside—by not losing your job, by adding your little candle to the general illumination."

"If you knew Allison——" A light, singularly clear and beautiful, shone in Jerry's eyes as he spoke the name. "After all she's been through to be dragged in the dirt of a sordid newspaper sensation——"

"Hold up a bit." Peter's pipe cut a thick arc through the air. "You've made three distinct points there. Let's get them straight. In the first place, as I mentioned before, you can't undo facts. If the lady wanted a quiet life for her family she should have arranged to step out of it a little less intriguingly. I'm not being cynical—just realistic. Realism doesn't seem to be one of your outstanding qualities, if I may say so. You can no more stop the publicity than you could stop a flood by poking pebbles into a breaking dam. You see, you tried, and all you gained was to get me down here on the story. The futile sacrifice of an idealist, my lad."

Jerry frowned gloomily at the floor, but at Peter's

next words he looked up sharply, for those words were spoken with unexpected softness.

"I'll tell you another thing," Peter said. The pipe dropped from his fingers, burning an unregarded hole in the hotel bed-spread. "I know how you feel. I was mixed up in a case once, for the *Herald*—the tule marsh murder, maybe you've heard of it—and for weeks I thought the girl I was in love with, the girl I'm married to now, might very well have done the killing. Figure the effect of that on my peace of mind! Yet I'm glad I went on with it. I'm glad I didn't stop short of the truth. And I've a hunch you'll be glad if you go on with it, too. It's such a strong hunch that I've told you something nobody alive, except Barbara, knows."

"Thanks," Jerry said huskily. His boyish face looked somehow more mature. In that one word he won, and accepted, the adult friendship of the man on the bed.

"But the third thing is more important than either you or I. You've got to believe in your job, young man. You said something about a sordid crime sensation in the papers. There are always thin-witted people complaining about the play given to crime news—though I notice most of them seem to read it. But for good or ill, human nature is what it is, and I've a notion it's worth our respect, even if we don't like it. The great stories have been crime stories all down the ages. When Shakespeare wanted to write *Macbeth* and *King Lear* and *Hamlet* he rooted around in Holinshed's Chronicles—which were the bound newspaper files of the day—and hunted up a good crime yarn. Maybe I'm wrong about *Hamlet,* but the principle's the same. Murder mysteries, every one of them. And there's *Œdipus*—one of the grandest detective stories ever conceived. The Greeks and the Elizabethans responded to those stories—Shakespeare and Sophocles responded to them. And the stuff is still there. Unfortunately, Shakespeare and Sophocles haven't got jobs on daily papers, and the public has to get along as best it can

with you and me. But don't you go turning up your nose at crime news. Ding that pipe!"

The torrent of Peter's outpouring was abruptly stemmed by his discovery of the widening circle of smouldering cloth on the bed. He beat out the rim of sparks with a folded newspaper and shook out the remaining ashes from the pipe bowl to the floor.

"But these are real people—people that can be hurt," Jerry insisted, the stubborn lines deepening at the corners of his lips.

"No, tragedy isn't usually comfortable. But it's big. It's big even when it's a penniless bum turning on the gas in a cheap lodging house. That's what I want you to get. Death is clean. Life sometimes—isn't. I don't deny that your young friend is in for a hard time of it. Let her step out and face it. You face it with her."

"But you don't know——"

"Sure, I don't know," Peter overrode the interruption. "I've come down here to find out. So have men from all the other papers—or if they're not here yet they soon will be. So, presumably, have the sheriff and the police and a few negligibles like that. They'll all get something—you can bet on that. But what we want to get, you and I, is the truth. The truth may be painful, it may even be evil—but it isn't tawdry. It has a dignity all its own. You might tell that to Allison."

"But I don't know the truth myself!" Jerry admitted miserably. "Nobody does."

"You're going to work with me in trying to find it out," Peter asserted. "If I thought you'd back down and run for cover I'd be out at the ranch house now, poking around for myself, or interviewing the sheriff or somebody instead of putting in a hard afternoon's work on this bed. But if you did that you'd be stupid—and unimaginative. And you're not."

Dead silence fell upon the room for the better part of a minute. Peter turned over, reached out for a crumpled sack of cheap tobacco in his coat pocket, and deliberately filled his pipe. But his eyes through their thick-

lensed glasses were fixed unwaveringly, though unobtrusively, on Jerry's face.

At last there was a movement from the arm-chair. It was the movement of a man pulling himself taut, squaring his shoulders, disdaining the support of the chair back.

"I believe you're right," Jerry said quietly. In that quietness was the signal of his newly wakened manhood, though the blue eyes sought Peter's gray ones with boyish, hero-worshiping admiration.

"I thought so," Peter agreed calmly. "Suppose you begin by telling me all you know about Mrs. Cole, known as Mrs. Asbury."

## CHAPTER III

It was done with a rifle—the whole top of her head——" Jerry's ruddy face paled, and his eyes, wide with remembered horror, stared into vacancy beyond Peter, beyond the wall of the hotel bedroom. His voice had the curious flatness of one who grips tightly his self-control. "And it had to be Allison who found her. Allison opening the door on—that!"

"I believe you wired that it might have been suicide?" Peter swung him away from that vision of Allison in the doorway.

"It might have been—except for the telephone call. It's queer, I tell you! It's dreadful enough in itself, God knows. But it's queer, besides."

Peter swung his long legs over the side of the bed and sat erect.

"I'll go out there with you presently and look things over," he said.

"No! Not again! I couldn't——" The words stumbled over one another, hoarsely.

"Oh, yes, you can—and you will," Peter assured him. "You'll be able to spot, better than anybody

except the daughter, whether there's anything unusual in the circumstances surrounding the woman's death. I never said this job was pleasant. Are the police guarding the place?"

"No," Jerry found himself unconsciously responding to Peter's matter-of-fact manner. "The—the body's been taken away, but everything else has been left as it was."

"That's good. Who's there now?"

"She is," Jerry said gloomily.

"Great Scott! The girl?"

"Yes. She wouldn't go away. There really wasn't any place for her to go. The neighbours would have taken her in, of course. But she's proud. The neighbours weren't very cordial during these last six months, since Asbury left, you know. She wouldn't take anything from them now."

"Look here," Peter said impatiently. "There are too many allusions in all this that I don't follow. I suppose I ought to rush out there at once, before all the other reporters get the drop on me——"

"She won't let them in."

"Sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Then it's a good thing the police aren't there—though, come to think of it, it's rather funny. Reporters have a way of getting round sheriff's men, on occasion. But she'll let you in—and me with you. I begin to think, young man, that you're the most valuable country correspondent the *Herald* ever had."

"I hate to use my friendship for—for her as if it were a means to an end. If she thought that——" Jerry demurred.

"She won't. Get this straight. I want to get this story for the *Herald,* of course. But you want me to get it, if I can, because it's the only way to get freedom and peace for your little friend. There's no freedom where things are hidden. I'm talking in the dark, but I know that much. Now let's go back of last night altogether—

clear back of it to the beginning, as far as you know it. How long have you known them?"

"For two years—ever since Mrs. Asbury, as she was always called, bought the ranch and moved out here, to lead what she called the simple life. Allison was sixteen then. But there were years before that. That's what's so horrible—those years for a child. Allison was twelve when it happened."

Peter glanced furtively at his watch. He longed to tell Jerry that there was a story to be put on the wire for Jimmy—a story which so far dealt chiefly in unidentified pronouns and emotional pauses. But he forced himself to silence.

"Can you see the child that she was then—sensitive, sheltered, hardly out of the age of fairy tales? They spent three months that summer camping in the Upper Yellowstone. Cole was on the verge of a breakdown and had been ordered to drop business, to get out of reach of it altogether and have a complete vacation. By the way, nobody else knows yet that she is—was—the wife of the millionaire tyre king."

"Good enough!" Peter commented. "They're looking up that end at the office. It gets us off to a good start."

"It will come out sooner or later, of course."

"Well, the *Herald* has some interest in coming out with it sooner and leaving the other papers to do it later," Peter grinned. "But go on about this Yellowstone business."

"It was there that Allison's mother met Asbury," Jerry said slowly. "I'd better stick to the bare facts—I don't pretend to understand it all. Asbury, you understand, was twenty years younger than she—a young forest ranger. She used to go out with him on the trails while Cole rested in camp. Mostly they took the child along—they didn't seem to think she mattered. Anyway, Mrs. Cole fell madly in love with him. It was a queer thing. She lost all sense of everything but Asbury—except the child. And even there her love showed

itself only in keeping Allison with her. It didn't stop her. I don't pretend to understand Asbury—whether it was her money, or whether he was really smitten, for a time. Perhaps her passion flattered him. She was beautiful, you know, and cultivated—had been everywhere, seen everything. There may have been a glamour——

" Anyway, they ran off together, taking the child with them. She didn't give a thought to Cole's side of it. By the time he got back in touch with civilisation she'd got out all her money—she had quite a bit of her own—and had vanished. For the next six years she lived with Asbury as his wife—and in all that time her ferocious, jealous, utterly possessive passion never wavered. She bought this ranch and installed him on it so that he'd be out of the way of other women. She even kept house herself in an idyllic, Marie Antoinette fashion, dispensing almost entirely with servants so that they could be quite alone.

" Cole got track of them in time, but he didn't divorce her. Perhaps that was his idea of punishment—perhaps he hoped she'd get over her infatuation and come back—perhaps he was glad to keep out of a public scandal."

" Let's stick to the main highway for the moment," Peter prodded him gently. " These fascinating bypaths can be explored later."

" I've thought about it such a lot," Jerry apologised. " The thing that was so awful for Allison was the way they fought—even physically fought—at the end. She'd cling to him and plead. And then he'd thrust her from him and streak down the road to town in his car, leaving her sobbing and raving to Allison things that no young girl ought to listen to. Then she'd write and telephone begging him to come back—and he did come back, for shorter and shorter intervals. The reconciliations were even worse than the quarrels. The grand passion listens all right in opera—but it doesn't make such a pretty impression in real life.

" Anyway, six months ago he left her for good, and moved to town. There were scenes—even public scenes on the street. She talked wildly to any one who would listen. That's why the neighbours cooled off. They began to be suspicious, too, though they still called her Mrs. Ashbury. Allison tells me that her mother persuaded Ashbury to make an appointment with her for last night. Allison went out into the orchard—to escape from what she would have to see and hear if she stayed. After an hour or so she came back to the corner of the house and listened. Everything was silent, so she came on, thinking Asbury had left. And so he had—if he ever came at all. For when she opened the door her mother was lying in a pool of blood on the floor. Blood was spattered everywhere—on the walls, the doors, even the ceiling. The light was turned on—the blood shone in the light—she leaned back against some of it before she knew what she was doing. The blood——" Jerry slumped in his chair, covering his face with his hands. From across the room Peter could see the quivering of his shoulders.

" Pull yourself together, man," he said brusquely. " Stop looking at it. We can't have you turning sick. There isn't time. What happened then? Was it Allison who sent for the police?" Peter rapped out the questions sharply, stinging Jerry back to consciousness of the room in which he sat, forcing him away from contemplation of that other room where he had stood and caught the gleam of light on blood.

" No," Jerry answered at last. " She didn't telephone. She turned and ran down the road to the house where I live—it's not the nearest one, but it's less than a quarter of a mile away. I heard her pounding the door with her fists. When I opened it and she came in, I could get nothing out of her at first. She caught sight of the blood on the side of her skirt, you see, and she began to tear at it, trying to tear it off her, screaming." Jerry wiped his brow with a handkerchief held in trembling fingers. " It was pretty awful," he muttered.

" My God! If he'd only written the story—just like that," Peter thought regretfully, remembering the bare hundred-word telegram which had apprised the *Herald* office of events at the ranch house. But all he said was, " Did you notify the police yourself, then?"

" No, that's the funny part of it. When we got back to the ranch house—I hated to take her back, but she wouldn't hear of anything else—the sheriff and the coroner and the chief of police were already there. A switchboard operator on the Medbury exchange had telephoned the sheriff's office that something was seriously wrong at the Asbury place. She'd had some kind of message, I don't know just what. But the telephone receiver was still dangling from the hook in the room where—where it happened, when we all got there. That message must have been the last living voice to reach the outside world from that room until—it was all over."

## CHAPTER IV

So far as the actual shot goes, I take it she might have done it herself?" Peter raised his voice above the rattling chug-chug of his antiquated car, which he always affectionately and personally referred to as " Bossy." Bossy was making a great to-do over the steeply graded country road which ran up hill for the last of the three and a half miles between Medbury and the Asbury place. But, despite her pants and groans, a glance at the speedometer would have shown that she kept to an even thirty.

" I don't see how anybody can tell. It wasn't a bullet hole, you know. I tell you the whole top of her head is gone!" Jerry's hand clenched on the door frame of the car. " The chief of police thinks she did it—through the mouth."

" Oh—he does?" Peter pondered this information for a moment. Then his lips puckered, and from them came a low minor whistle—a single wailing phrase, re-

peated over and over. " Hoo-oo-oo, hu-hu-hu hoo."

Jerry fidgeted in the seat beside him.

" Don't!" he burst out at last. " You sound like a lost soul."

" Nobody likes that tune," Peter remarked in a slightly injured tone. " Jimmy's the only person who doesn't howl when he hears it. But then, Jimmy recognises it as my own little ' Up and at 'em, *en avant,* sic' 'em, Fido ' or what have you. So the chief of police decided how it was, just like that, in advance of a medical examination, eh?"

" I heard him tell the sheriff, as they were leaving the house. He seemed quite positive."

" Did he know about Asbury's little social call?" Peter inquired.

" Allison told him when they were at the house. He asked if she had seen Asbury, but she hadn't, of course. He may not have been there at all. Here's where you turn in—there's quite a long driveway before you get to the house."

Peter obediently nosed Bossy between two wooden posts which in times past had supported a farmyard gate. He brought her to the edge of the driveway and set his brake. A hen that had been sunning itself in the dust rose with a protesting squawk as the car came to a standstill.

" She spent a lot of money on the place—nearly fifty thousand dollars." Jerry felt that he must say something practical to offset his lapse into poetry. " But it didn't hold Asbury. And Allison loves the place so!" A sharp note of pain cut through his lowered voice.

" Poor kid!" Peter turned toward the path of flat stones leading to the front door. But Jerry's touch on his sleeve pulled him back.

" That's no good. She won't answer the bell. You stay here, and I'll go around to the side."

Peter obediently leaned against Bossy's crumpled fender, his eyes following Jerry's retreating figure until it disappeared around the corner of the house.

His wandering gaze suddenly became alert, focusing sharply on the patch of dusty roadway at his feet. As if drawn by tightened wires, his slouching form became erect and tense. In another moment Peter, oblivious of dust, was on his knees in the road, his dark head bent low to within a foot off the ground, his shortsighted eyes peering intently. Without shifting his gaze, as if he feared that the road would dissolve away if he turned his eyes from it, he reached into his coat pocket for a pad of folded copy paper and a stub of black pencil. Then, his attention darting from road to paper and back again, he covered the sheet with a series of apparently meaningless lines.

The result resembled a map of a cow pasture done by an insane person. The crazy effect was enhanced by a certain difference in the character of the lines themselves. Some of them were very black (Peter had wetted his pencil point between his lips for those), others faint. A third set was dotted, and a fourth ran in narrow parallels. Peter had not even omitted the blur made by the hen's sunbath. In the corner, opposite the figures, 1, 2, 3, 4, Peter drew with meticulous care a series of small geometrical patterns, which might have been designs for figured dress prints.

He was startled to his feet by the sound of a boyish yodel around the corner of the house—the shrill call that children have used from time immemorial to signal their kind.

"Yow-oo! Yow-oo! Yow-oo!" It began on a low note and swooped an octave and a half on the second syllable.

"Suffering cats!" Peter breathed. "He lets out a noise like that and then objects to my whistling!" And yet there was something in the unconscious youthfulness of the sound that caught at his throat. He had heard it so often—across back yards, down the length of arc-lighted streets. He was hearing it now, the yodel of boyhood, close to the house of death.

The yodel was followed by a faint scraping sound, as of a window opening.

"Allison! Come down. I've been looking for you in the back orchard."

"Jerry!" Peter knew from the tone of the second voice that it came from lips that were trembling. "I saw you—saw some one. But I thought it might not be —be you."

"Of course it was I!" Jerry said with unnecessary vehemence. "Come out the back door, will you, please? I've something to tell you."

There was a moment's pause followed by an indistinguishable murmur, in which Peter caught only the last words.

"A friend of mine. A real friend, I tell you. For God's sake, trust me, Allison!"

Peter hastily brushed the dust from his knees and resumed his position by Bossy's fender just as the two figures came in sight around the corner of the house. He noted, as worth remembering, that the girl, although she had been loath to come, did not hang back. Having made up her mind, she advanced quickly, a step or two ahead of her companion.

She came straight up to Peter, her head flung back in a gesture of unconscious defiance. It was hard to believe that those lips had ever trembled.

"I've told Jerry to go away," she said. "But he wouldn't. I came out to you because, if you're a friend of his, you'd better tell him to go away too. He said you wanted to talk to me, but there's nothing, absolutely nothing, that I'll tell you. Only—get Jerry to go away!"

"I'm going to stick by Allison. You know that." The words were quietly spoken. Jerry's determination was too firm to have need of emphasis. Peter bestowed on him a brief sidewise glance of approval. Boy though he was, once Jerry had made up his mind, he would be an ally or an opponent worth reckoning with.

"O-oh!" It was a mere exhaled breath, hardly

more than a sigh. But Peter thought that he had never heard a sound so desolate.

Allison stood with her hands tightly clasped before her. After that one moan of despairing protest she was silent, every line of her slight body rigid. Peter gazed at her consideringly, with a friendly smile that robbed his stare of rudeness. He had never seen a face so young and yet so stamped with tragedy.

"Look here, young lady," he said, very gently. "You're almost at the edge of things. If you don't look out, you're going to crash over."

Allison's lips relaxed in a faint, satirical smile. The utter disillusion of that smile was sadder than her tight-lipped suffering.

"Allison, won't you let me get you away somewhere? I'm sure I could arrange something." Jerry's agonised voice cut across the silence.

"I'm already arranging something," Peter answered calmly. "We're not going to run away from the ghosts in this house. We're going to lay them. Barbara's coming down. Barbara's my wife," he explained, turning to Allison. "She's only a few years older than you are, but she's been through a few things herself. I'll telephone her as soon as I get back to Medbury, and she'll be down on the night train. She won't hang around your neck all the time, but you won't be here alone any more. Barbara's a pretty good sort to have around."

"You'd ask your wife to come to—a place like this—to this house—for the sake of a perfect stranger?" Astonishment broke through Allison's habitual reserve.

"Sure I would. And she'll want to come. That's the kind of girl she is." Peter's long homely face was irradiated by a look that made it almost beautiful.

"Now I'll tell you what I want you to do, Jerry. I've a couple of questions to ask Miss Allison, and then I want you to take that bus of mine and go with her for a long drive. You're to pretend that both of you are children. You're not to talk about one thing except

what children talk about. Understand?" Peter glanced warningly at Jerry and received a quick nod in reply. "I'll stay here and look things over. But first, I'd like to know this. How many cars did it take to bring the chief of police and the sheriff and coroner here last night?"

Allison hesitated a moment. Then her eyes looked straight into Peter's.

"Only one," she answered. "It was a big seven-passenger car."

"A Cadillac," Jerry added. "It was the sheriff's own car, and he drives a Cadillac. I noticed that."

"And what sort of car is Mr. Asbury's?"

"A La Salle," Allison said. "At least, it was mother's, but she gave it to him."

"Black?"

"No, blue. A funny sort of greenish blue. He painted it himself."

"And that's all? I mean, those were the only people who came—who might have come?"

"That's—all." Allison's voice was hardly more than a whisper.

Then, without speaking, she held out her hand. It was a cold hand, and the fingers twitched with nervous tension; but its clasp was firm. In that handclasp Peter knew that she had accepted his compact—that she had pinned her faith on him to rescue her from her nightmare world.

## CHAPTER V

PETER stood at the turn of the drive, jingling the two keys which Allison had dropped into his hand. One was the outside key to the back door and the other locked the door from the kitchen into the hall. His eyes followed the rapid and somewhat careening progress of Bossy down the narrow lane.

" She won't be able to think of much except the danger to her neck on that drive, I'm thinking," he murmured with a grin. " Well, that'll be good for her, and I'll bet Jerry's just smart enough to know it."

As the car swerved sharply to make the turn to the highway between the vine-draped posts, Peter heard the scraping sound of Bossy's rear fender rubbing against the wood. His eyes caught the gleam of Allison's white sleeve as she clung to the edge of the door.

" Not much leeway there," Peter observed philosophically. Bossy had long passed the age when her owner regarded her beauty paint with concern. " Huh!" he broke out suddenly. " I just wonder now—— Well, that'll wait." And whistling under his breath he entered the house.

The first thing that Peter noticed as he opened the kitchen door, taking care not to brush against anything as he entered, was the glare of yellow light. The shades were drawn over the windows, but the light from three electric fixtures blazed down upon the room of death. Involuntarily Peter shivered. There was something ghastly about that artificial illumination, casting sharp black shadows, after the gentle sanity of the sunshine outside.

Allison, locking the doors behind her, leaving the room alone with its horror, had forgotten to turn off the lights. Automatically his hand reached out for the switch, but he drew it back. The lights had been turned on by a hand now dead. The inanimate electric current spanned the gulf that separated the present from the past by more than a few hours of time, by a cleavage that cut across the continuity of life.

" Deeds of darkness—dark passions." From the time when mankind dwelt in the caves and forests, darkness had been a symbol of the unexplained. Yet somehow the mystery of what had happened in this room seemed the more sinister because the terms of its secret lay before his staring eyes, taunting him that they needed

no sheltering darkness to hide their meaning from his puzzled brain.

The air of the closed room was thick with a smell that is like nothing else on earth—the overpowering scent of blood. Peter swayed on his feet. A heavy lump seemed to be expanding in the pit of his stomach. His fingers closed over the doorknob, with a blind impulse to flee into the sunshine, slamming the door behind him. The whistle had died away on his lips. Then suddenly, like a blow between the shoulders, the old habit of detachment reasserted itself. With fingers that were stiff and cold he pulled the wad of copy paper from his coat pocket.

"Huh!" he said, "I see they've put back the telephone."

The Peter who had staggered in the doorway slunk back under cover. Peter Piper of the *Herald* was on the job.

With cautious footsteps, as if he were crossing a brook on stepping stones, Peter picked his was across the room. It was a progress requiring care, for hardly a square foot of the floor space was clear of dark dabbles of blood. They made a grotesque, meaningless pattern of dots over the blue and white of linoleum. The four walls of the room, even the ceiling, were spattered.

"Hold hard," Peter said aloud in a queer, cracked voice. "It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter a bit. Ah, here we are!"

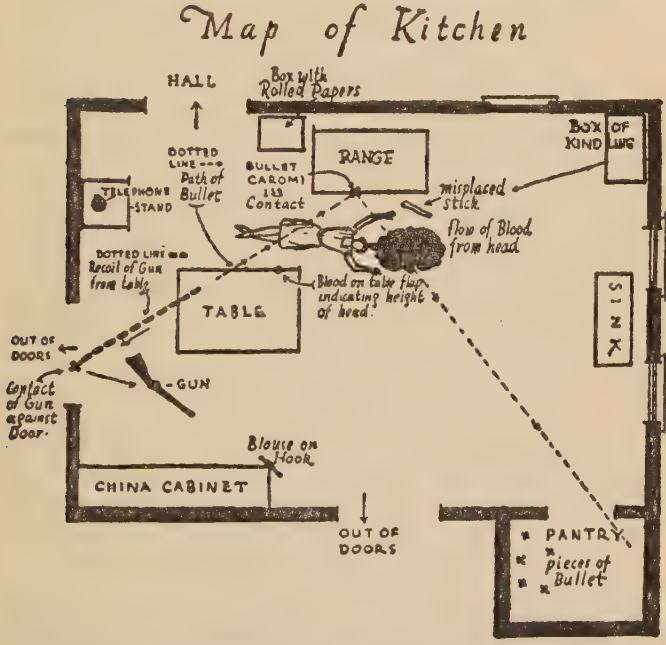
He had advanced around the corner of the kitchen table. On the floor, between the table and the stove, was a dark puddle. A small stand against the wall at right angles to the stove held the desk telephone. Peter gazed briefly but intensely down upon the pool at his feet.

"She wasn't killed elsewhere and dragged in here, that's certain. It must have happened—here."

He turned his attention to the telephone, bending close without touching it. A few tiny specks of silver-

gray powder had lodged in the crevices at the top of the receiver.

"So they've tested it for finger prints," he commented. "I wonder what they found." However, he continued to gaze down upon the instrument, one eyebrow cocked at an inquiring angle. "Right in the centre of the stand," he muttered. "Most precise. Now I wonder what——? However, that might have




been the sheriff's party—I wouldn't put it past them to move things about."

From the telephone he transferred his attention to the stove, flanked on one side by a box of newspapers, neatly rolled in bundles for starting the fire, and on the other, somewhat farther away, by another box filled

with kindling wood. Squatting on his haunches and leaning forward, he peered intently at the black surface of the stove, stamped with its meaningless curlicues of decoration. Suddenly he extended his little finger, and felt exploringly a small depression, about the size and shape of half a pea, which had no relation to the patterned design.

"Huh!" he exclaimed. "So that's where the bullet hit. Of course, they've found it and carted it away by now. Well, it may be a good thing to impress them that I know where it landed, anyhow."

Twice more in his circling of the wall Peter halted. Once was at the door leading into the back yard, where he examined with some care a small mark, scored with faint cross-hatched lines, where the cream enamel paint had been nicked off, letting an earlier coat of gray show through. The second time he stood for several moments before a blouse, fresh from the cleaner's, suspended on a coat hanger from the top of a china cupboard. Crumpled pink tissue paper was thrust into the shoulders to keep the delicate material from wrinkling, and the bill was still pinned to one sleeve.

"A blouse from the cleaner's, delivered yesterday," Peter mused when he had examined the slip of paper. "And it's too small to belong to Allison. Surely a woman planning suicide does not order her clothes dry-cleaned! But then, she might not have been planning it exactly. It may have been a sudden impulse. No gun in sight. But they've taken that to the sheriff's office, of course. Nize babies, carted away all the evidence. Still, you never can tell."

His circuit of the room completed, Peter returned to the table. It was an unpainted kitchen table with a neat oil-cloth cover. Crouching low, Peter humped himself along, scrutinising each of its legs in turn.

"That's a new table," he informed the silent air. "Still smells piney, and the wood hasn't darkened from exposure. Besides, if she'd had it long she'd have painted it. She was that sort—a neat and fastidious

lady. But I can find that out from Allison. By jiminy!" his voice dropped to an awestruck whisper. "Here's something they forgot to take away! Only it may not be evidence at all. It may not mean a darn thing. And then again—and then again, it just possibly might, Peter Piper, if you're not such a darn fool as to jump at conclusions."

His inspection completed, Peter switched off the lights and locked the door behind him. The spell of horror exerted by the room was broken. It had become a problem—a problem in which he knew that as yet he had an insufficient number of known points even to guess at a solution. However, as he sat down on the porch step and lighted his pipe, he was whistling the woeful cadence which was a sure indication of Peter's cheerfulness. He covered a sheet of copy paper with sprawling notes until the creeping pervasive twilight made further writing impossible.

The familiar chug-chug of Bossy's engine roused him from a quiescent, almost dreamy state. Peter had a long evening's work before him, including his story to be written and put on the wires for the early edition of the *Herald,* but he knew how to take his rest where he found it.

"Here we are!" Jerry hailed him, leaping over the door and turning to give his hand to Allison. "It was a good idea."

"Yes, it was," Allison agreed. "It was a real getting away—for an hour."

"Well, I'm the one who must be getting away now," Peter said. "I'll telephone Barbara the minute I get to town. Then I'm going to see what the sheriff has to say—if he'll be so kind as to say it."

"Do you think it was—suicide?" Allison faced him squarely.

"I don't see how any one could think anything yet. That's what surprises me about the chief of police last night."

"Well," Allison said steadily, "I don't think it was

suicide. I'm going to give you something the sheriff and the chief of police don't know about."

Without waiting for an answer she ran into the house and a moment later reappeared, holding a small bottle.

" You see that I am trusting you—with everything," she said gravely.

Peter turned the bottle to the light. It was filled with white powder, and the small druggists' label, flanked by its red skull and crossbones, read " cyanide of potassium."

" I found that this morning, hidden in her handkerchief box. I couldn't hep thinking that if I looked long enough I'd find a letter from her—something to explain. But what I found was this. My mother—do you think my mother would do—that "—she waved her hand toward the room with the blinds drawn over the windows—" when there was this other way out—this way that would let her die without wrecking the beauty she treasured so?"

" I don't know, Allison' I honestly don't. But I think this bottle may help us in finding out," Peter said. " Are you coming back to town with me, Jerry?"

" No," Jerry answered, and even in the semi-darkness Peter knew that the stubborn lines had formed at the corners of his mouth. " I'll wait till your wife comes. I won't come in if Allison doesn't want me, but I'm going to sit right on this doorstep until I'm relieved. I ought never to have let Allison persuade me to leave her here alone in the first place."

Peter swung Bossy around and drove alone down the driveway, his mind intent on the bottle and its significance for the questions he intended to ask when he reached the sheriff's office. Then just as he was twisting the wheel to make the turn between the leaning gateposts he brought the car to an abrupt stop.

" Another minute and I'd have gone on and forgotten about it completely. What a priceless ass I am!"

After a search which cluttered the seat of the car with road maps, collapsible drinking cups, a pair of pliers,

a mouldy, half-consumed package of dried figs, a package of pipe cleaners and three gloves, he exhumed a flashlight from Bossy's side pocket. Despite his haste, he spent the better part of fifteen minutes in poking the light among the vines, first on one fence post, then on the other. Presently he let the vines fall back into place. But as his foot pressed the starter, the sputter of the engine mingled with the weird desolate notes of Peter Piper's battle cry.

"Hoo-oo-oo, hu-hu-hu-hoo!" whistled Peter.

## CHAPTER VI

"I'm Peter Piper of the *Herald*. I've come down on this Cole mystery."

The sheriff swung around sharply in his swivel chair. Peter, whose first impression had been the semi-globe of an almost completely bald head above the chair back, was surprised at the youthfulness of the round, good-natured face.

"That's just like you newspaper folks," the sheriff said querulously. "You always want to play up a mystery to keep your readers excited, even when there isn't any."

"No?" Peter's voice was dangerously gentle. "I thought there was."

"No mystery at all. A plain case of suicide."

"Plain?" Peter's eyebrow cocked at an angle. "Now whatever else it is, I shouldn't have called it just plain. Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Sure! Come right on in." Not even a sleepless night and a case which, even if plain, was indubitably troublesome, could rob Sheriff Rondel's voice of its natural hearty hospitality. "Come in and make yourself at home. Glad to talk to you. The trouble with you fellers is that you hate to admit what's as plain as the nose on your face. We don't want to get this all messed up as a mystery, see?"

" Oh, I know," Peter agreed cheerfully. " It's only in fiction that the obvious doesn't happen. But the trouble in Mrs. Cole's taking off is, that nothing about it is quite so obvious as all that."

" How do you know her name's Cole? Did you hear about the note?"

" Hm," Peter grunted non-committally.

" Well, we're not so sure of the Cole business, at that. We haven't succeeded in checking it up."

" You know," Peter suggested modestly, " if you showed me the note, and it reads like suicide, it would make a good deal of difference in the way the story's handled. Besides, it's just possible I might get a line on the Cole angle. I haven't sent in my story yet."

" Well, it spells suicide, all right. Found it pinned to the pillow in her bedroom last night. Read it yourself and see." Rondel drew a slip of paper from his pocket and laid it, with an air of triumph, on the desk before Peter.

It was brief and without superscription or signature.

" In case anything happens to me," it read, " notify C. L. Cole, Birmingham."

" Her handwriting, of course," Peter threw out casually.

" Of course it is! Who else's would it be?" The sheriff's voice was wrathfully positive. Its indignant emphasis told Peter as plainly as words that Rondel had taken the note for granted, without checking the handwriting.

" Well, it's probably hers at that. But one can't be too careful, of course." Peter was definitely out to make an impression—the impression that he would be a dangerous person to leave around loose, hunting out his own facts instead of accepting them from the sheriff. It was his method of making sure that the sheriff, as a safety measure, would share with him the facts in his own possession. " And what's the difficulty about Cole?"

" Simply that we can't find out who he is. We've

wired Birmingham and there's no C. L. Cole in the telephone book, the directory, the classified section, nor any place else, so far as they've been able to find out."

"If we use that note to make it a suicide story in the *Herald,* we'd want to know who Cole is," Peter remarked suavely.

"So do *we* want to know who he is!"

"Well, I'll make a bargain with you." Peter smiled with his air of disarming friendliness in to the round, troubled eyes of the sheriff. "I know who Cole is. You'd rather have us publish it as coming from you than as if we got it ourselves when the sheriff's office couldn't. That'll be O.K. with us. We won't hold out our information on you—if you don't hold out yours on us."

"You—know—who—Cole—is?" The pale blue eyes of the sheriff were no longer troubled; they were blank with astonishment.

"Sure. I got in here several hours ago. I've been looking about a bit. All I ask is that you'll play ball and answer a few questions about the stuff you carted away from the ranch house last night. Is it a go?"

"I'll tell you whatever you want to know," Rondel gasped.

"Fine! Did you ever hear of Clarkson Cole, the tyre king?"

"But he lives in Detroit, not Birmingham!"

"I never said he didn't. But his wife ran away with Asbury six years ago, for all that. Moreover, Cole has now retired from active business and spends a great deal of his time travelling in Europe. Mrs. Cole may never have heard of Birmingham, Alabama. But she's travelled a good deal herself. It's a cinch that Birmingham to her means Birmingham, England. If you wire the head offices of the company in Detroit you'll find that Clarkson Cole is absent on a trip to the British Isles. You'd better do just that little thing. But I know from outside sources that I'm right."

Rondel's plump cheeks, which protruded as if, like

a squirrel, he had used them as a repository for nuts, flushed with ingenuous gratitude.

"Thanks." He extended a pudgy hand across the desk. "You've saved us a lot of bother. I suppose I'd have caught on in time, but it's certainly white of you not to spring it in the paper and make out that we're all country slow-pokes down here."

"I had an axe to grind," Peter said honestly. "But I don't like to give anybody a slap out of sheer cussedness. Now it's your turn to help me."

"I'll do whatever I can—you can count on that."

"For instance, about the gun."

"The gun was found lying on the opposite side of the table from the body, on the floor between the table and the door. There weren't any finger marks on it."

"There wouldn't be. Everybody knows about finger prints nowadays and doesn't leave them lying around."

"But Mrs. Asbury's finger prints were on the telephone."

"Oh, yes, the telephone call. But let's keep to the *modus operandi* for the moment."

"The *modus*——?"

"The gun. She fired it off and then walked around the table with it, eh?"

"Not much, she didn't. She rested the gun on the table, or else propped it against the telephone stand, and it kicked back on to the floor. She pushed the trigger with the stick."

"Hold on a minute; you're going too fast. What stick?"

Rondel might well have been forgiven for the supercilious smile of pleasure with which he welcomed Peter's evident surprise.

He did not immediately answer. Instead, he primed himself loose from the tight-fitting arms of the swivel chair and walked with exaggerated slowness across the room to a corner cupboard. It was the sheriff's turn to be impressive. He selected with deliberation a key from the bunch which made a permanent bulge in his

trousers pocket and opened the door. His face was beaming as he recrossed the room.

"*That stick!*" he said dramatically, flinging a piece of kindling wood on the desk before Peter.

"Oh, ye-es?" Peter's long face was bisected by an appreciative grin.

He lifted the stick gingerly, holding it close to his near-sighted eyes. One side of it was speckled with drops of blood, and the tip, for about two inches of its length, was dyed solidly with the same brownish purple stain.

"What's this?" he asked, pointing to the darkened tip.

"Oh, that," the sheriff said, looking somewhat sheepish, "that doesn't mean anything. I picked up the stick and poked around with it to see if there was anything—anything to be fished out of the puddle of blood on the floor. That was before I realised its importance as evidence. It was all pretty sudden, you know, coming in on a thing like that."

"I should say it was," Peter agreed. "But the stick?"

"It was lying above the woman's head, about four feet away to the right. She used the stick to reach the trigger, and flung it from her as she fell back."

"Quite possible," Peter admitted. "And most ingenious of you to find out just how it was so quickly. You went out there, I believe, in response to a telephone call?"

"Yes. The operator 'phoned my house. I got the coroner and the chief of police and went right out. The operator told us there'd been a murder at the Asbury place, and so of course, that's what I thought it was at first."

"Let's get this straight. It's very interesting. Tell me exactly what happened—so far as you were concerned, I mean."

## CHAPTER VII

"WELL, I had gone to bed," the sheriff said, "and I had to get dressed and telephone the others to meet me. It must have been about fifteen minutes before we got started, and it took maybe another ten to get out there. The lights were all on, and the doors, both front and back, were open; the screen doors were shut but not latched. We banged on the front door, but there was no answer, so we went around to the back. The place was empty when we got there. We didn't see the body at first—it was lying on the far side of the kitchen table. So we went on in—and there it was. It was—pretty awful." The sheriff mopped beads of perspiration from his broad face, from which the colour had receded, leaving it dough white.

"I didn't do anything at first. I just stood there, staring, for quite a spell. It's the first time anything like this has ever happened in Medbury. I was kind of —upset."

Peter regarded the fat sheriff with a new friendliness. He liked the way he admitted without apology the paralysis of horror which had held him staring at the figure on the floor. Any but a brave man would have thought it necessary to explain that he was no coward.

"It was a good thing the chief of police was along. He was the one who saw how it all happened. He kept his wits about him when I was just—dithering. He sent me upstairs to look through the rest of the house—and I can tell you I was glad enough of a job that took me away from the kitchen. That's how I came to find the note pinned to the pillow of the bed. When I got down he had it all figured out. By that time I'd come to myself, and I dusted the gun for finger prints. There weren't any, of course. You see, she never touched the gun at all."

"And the telephone call?" Peter reminded him.

" She put in the telephone call before she fired the shot, in order to throw the blame on Asbury. ' Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,' you know."

" Most ingenious," Peter said for the second time. " Was it your own idea?"

" I was too stunned to have any ideas," the sheriff confessed frankly. " It was Harris—the chief of police —who saw how the telephone call fitted in."

" And did it?" Peter inquired.

" Did it what?"

" Throw suspicion on Asbury."

" Asbury moved into town six months ago. We stopped at his boarding house and brought him down here for questioning when we got through at the ranch. Even if it was a clear case of suicide, I thought we ought to do that. But he hadn't been out there at all for more than a month. He runs an express business here in town, and he'd gone down to his office to look over his books and then went straight home."

" He didn't see anybody, I suppose?"

" No, as a matter of fact, he didn't. But, say, we all know Asbury—know him real well. He said he wasn't there, and that's enough. We let him go."

" Does Harris know him too—as well as you do?"

" Sure! Better, if anything. Besides, what's the use of putting him into a hole, ruining him, maybe, when the woman did it herself?"

" Mm-hm." Peter accepted this without comment. " Well, that gives me plenty to go on for to-morrow's yarn. I'll play up the quick work of the authorities in determining it was a suicide." Peter privately enjoyed the double meaning that might be placed on that word " determining." " By the way, what did you say the telephone operator's name was?"

" It was Edie Grainge called me. I've known her ever since before girls bobbed their hair."

" Thanks. And you name and initials, sheriff?"

" F. M. Rondel."

" Fine. It's understood, of course, that the quick

action of Sheriff F. M. Rondel in checking the note which he discovered on the dead woman's pillow has identified her as the wife of the millionaire tyre king, Clarkson Cole."

"Say, that's mighty good of you. I sure appreciate it." Rondel's shiny red cheeks expanded in a broad smile of gratitude as he extended his huge hand to Peter. "Anything I can do for you, any time."

"Well, of course, if any other newspaper men come buzzing around, you needn't tell them about the Cole identification."

"I always play ball with my friends, young feller. You've helped me a lot. If anybody else comes prying into our affairs I'll tell 'em that it'll all be explained at the inquest. By the way, I've a little something in the drawer here. How about a bit of a nightcap?"

The sheriff lumbered to the door, threw the catch, and again produced the enormous bunch of keys.

"Just get a couple of paper cups from the cooler, over there in the corner. This stuff ain't got a pre-war label pasted on the bottle, but the feller that makes it knows his business. It won't turn you blind, anyway."

As Peter sat haunched over Bossy's wheel, driving back to the hotel, he engaged in what he termed "ground and lofty meditation" on the personality of Sheriff F. M. Rondel.

"Always plays ball with his friends, eh? Well, I reckon he does just that. The trouble with a little town like this is that everybody knows everybody else. It's all rather trustful and idyllic. Everything's among friends, and the prohibition law doesn't bother him a bit. He knew the telephone operator when she was in the first grade at school, most likely. They all knew Asbury so well that they don't even ask him for an alibi. I can depend on Rondel to give the *Herald* all the breaks there are, out of personal gratitude. All very chummy. Of course, if a man's your friend he doesn't go around blowing people's brains out. It wouldn't be polite to think it for one moment.

" The sheriff's as honest as the well-known day, but he believes what he wants to believe and whatever that smart chief of police he admires so much tells him to believe. I can't help noting that the chief of police did all the headwork—and that it was mighty fast thinking. He may be right, at that. But as none of these diverse characters are *my* bosom friends, maybe I can view them with a more fishy eye. I just can't help reflecting that the chief had a grand opportunity to wipe finger prints off that gun, if he wanted to, while the coroner was fussing over the body and the sheriff was upstairs searching the house. Only, what makes me think he'd want to? Nothing, nothing whatever except that he dopes the whole business out too darned quick!"

When Peter roused the somnolent night clerk at the Western Union office to file his story an hour later, he was glad that he had not intrusted to the wire his private message to Jimmy. The yawning operator glanced at the clock as he fingered the sheets of copy paper marked " Night Press Rate Collect."

" I don't see how I have time to send all this," he protested. " The office closes at ten-thirty, and it's ten-twenty-five now."

" The bucolic scene has its disadvantages," Peter groaned inwardly. Then he beamed upon the half-roused clerk with his most appealing grin. " I'm sorry," he said, " I didn't know about the closing time. But I'd be awfully glad if you could help me out. You see, this tragedy out at the Asbury place is a pretty important affair."

But the youth at the other side of the counter was already deeply engaged in reading Peter's copy, his jaws moving with machine-like precision and accelerating tempo on the wad of gum in his cheek. His face held all the enthusiasm of a small boy who has ducked under the lines at a fire.

" Gee, ain't this great?" he exclaimed, almost gulping the gum in his excitement. " Nothing like this ever happened here before. To think Mrs. Asbury wasn't

Mrs. Asbury at all, but the wife of a millionaire! And I'm getting it all first, before it comes out in the papers. Sure, I'll send it for you! I wouldn't have missed this for a farm in duck heaven. It's a kick. That's what it is—a kick!"

Peter reflected that the weedy young man's " kick " would have been even more pronounced if he had not decided to send his story first and add the word to Jimmy separately. However, he mused with a grin, the small-town friendliness and susceptibility to " human interest " had its advantages as well as its drawbacks. Peter was quite sure that the telegraph office would not close at ten-thirty on any evening if he had a story concerning the Asbury ranch death to send over the wire.

He sat down at one of the empty tables, twining his long legs around the rungs of the chair, and scribbled his note on the pad of yellow telegraph blanks. Doubtless the post-box collectors kept early hours also, but he had to go down to the railroad station anyhow to meet Barbara and could put it on the train himself.

DEAR JIMMY [he wrote], Send me a week's expense money P. D. Q. The yarn I sent in is only what the authorities say. If the other papers take it without blinking, so much the better. But there's more in this than meets the eye—any eye, including my own. There's some darn queer angles to it. A mystery is a better story than a suicide, any day. And something tells me that this thing is going to churn up into a right pretty mystery. I may be nuts, at that; but if I don't get busy on it it's a cinch nobody else will. If you don't keep me down here to get to the bottom of it I'm going to die a violent death of baffled curiosity, so come through like a good fellow.

PETER PIPER.

" ' Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,' eh," he muttered as he licked a special delivery stamp and affixed it to a crumpled *Herald* envelope which he found in his pocket. " Well, hell hath no fury like a baffled newspaper man, I'd say!"

## CHAPTER VIII

"BARBARA, do you think it's true that 'hell hath no fury like a woman scorned?'"

It was an odd greeting to give a wife who had caught a night train on fifteen minutes' notice, having received no explanation beyond an urgent, "You'll be no end useful, old dear."

Barbara, however, was accustomed to Peter's suddenness. She would have liked to ask whether she was more likely to need an evening dress or hiking togs, but Peter had hung up before she had time to ask the question. Therefore she had telephoned for a taxi, methodically packed a bag in six minutes flat, left word with the dairy to discontinue the milk, tucked the week's household expense money into her purse, and now, after three hours' ride in a day coach, emerged as fresh and trim in her heather-tweed suit as if she had just stepped out of the proverbial band-box.

"It depends on the type of woman," she answered, as Peter flung her bag on the rear seat of Bossy. "Were you by any chance planning to scorn me, and did you bring me all the way down to Medbury for the purpose of seeing how hellish I'd be?"

"The clinging type. Possessive. A woman who had no horizon beyond her emotions—who couldn't fit love into the rest of life, but had to wrench life about to fit her love." Peter's eyes stared sombrely straight ahead.

"Good gracious, Peter," Barbara brought him sharply back to the present. "What lurid company you seem to have been keeping!"

"It isn't company—it's a corpse."

"Darling, I know you think you're talking sense, but honestly you aren't. Won't you just try to remember that I haven't the ghost of an idea what you're driving at?"

"Of course you haven't! I'm going to tell you——"

" Then please draw up at the side of the road and stop while you're telling it." Barbara's voice was gentle, but positive. She had had her experiences of Peter's wild driving when Bossy leaped and lurched in accompaniment to his rushing thoughts and his eyes sought the distance to the exclusion of traffic in the nearer foreground.

" You know, Barbara," Peter said when he had edged Bossy off the highway and switched off the lights, " the very first thing I ever thought about you, before I even thought you were pretty, was that you had brains. Well, brains are going to be at a premium around here for the next few days. It's the damnedest mix up—I'm glad you're here, old dear, for my own sake as well as Allison's."

" Considering that I don't know who's dead, nor who Allison is, I'm not likely to be much help so long as you content yourself with swearing about it." Even in the dark, Peter knew that Barbara was smiling—the elfin, gaminesque smile which made her look like a teasing child.

" It's like this," Peter said, answering the smile with a squeeze of Barbara's arm. " This woman was twenty years older than her lover. She ran away with him and has moved heaven and earth to keep him when he began to turn away from her to women nearer his own age. Her love for her daughter—that's Allison—was just as unreasoning. You can't call it selfish, exactly. It's just that she lived in a world of instinct and could not look beyond it. She wanted to have the child with her, so she kept her, without a thought of the effect on the girl herself. She needed Allison to furnish a safety valve for her excess emotion. Then, when she found that the man's love was slipping, she pleaded for it, fought for it, reminded him of what he owed her. She was found dead last night—shot through the head. But first she telephoned that she was being murdered.

" The call was intended to cast suspicion on the man, either for revenge, or to make sure that if she couldn't

have him he'd be put where no other woman would."

"But, my dear," Barbara's voice was sharp with incredulity. "She couldn't have done that—not if she was the kind of woman you say!"

"A-ah!" Peter's breath exhaled in a long-drawn sigh. "But there's enough evidence to satisfy the sheriff and the local chief of police."

"Pouff! Peter, what I really want to say is, 'Damn the evidence.' It simply couldn't happen. She might have shot this person, and herself afterward. But to put in that telephone call to throw suspicion on him was not the act of a woman in an emotional brain storm. It implies cold, calculating malice. Not the violent hate that is sometimes mixed up with a certain sort of love, but the icy, malignant hate that might come, I suppose, after love was dead. She was still in love with him, I take it?"

"Oh, yes, he left her six months ago and she was still trying with all her might to get him to come back."

"But look how she went about it! Was there any calculation there? Why, she did not even realise that you never get love by begging for it. She was so at the mercy of blind emotion that she could not calculate the most obvious effect of such storming tactics. By the way, did she mention his name in the telephone call?"

"No; at least, I don't think so," Peter said thoughtfully. "I haven't talked to the telephone operator yet, but I'm practically sure she didn't. If she had they would not have dared to release Asbury without detaining him for the inquest, anyhow."

"She hadn't let him alone lately? Given up hope and just brooded?"

"Oh, no, she hadn't let him alone—far from it."

"Well, then, however unreasonable it was, she still had hope. Her type would. Hope is an emotion, too. So far as you have told me, her whole life was a tangle of emotions and nothing else. She wouldn't give up hope just because reason and common sense were

against it. Would she have got out of his way, then, given him his freedom—and trusted to this vague telephone call to keep the freedom from being of any use to him? It simply couldn't happen. It's all the same too diabolical and too stupid.

" If she'd been broken-hearted and magnanimous, she might have committed suicide—perhaps with the idea of touching him, making him sorry for her. If she were violently jealous, which seems more likely, she might have killed herself, but she'd have taken him with her. The one thing she couldn't do would be deliberately to fake that telephone call—at once so cruelly premeditated and so indefinite—and then, not impulsively but calmly, proceed to kill herself." Barbara pulled herself up, breathless.

" She left a suicide note, And her finger prints were on the telephone. And the gun was found in a position where it might have recoiled after she pushed the trigger with a stick. And there was a bottle of poison, indicating suicidal tendencies, in her room." Peter dropped the points disjointedly.

Barbara's small gloved fist smote the rim of the door. But her voice, when she spoke, was studiously restrained.

" Peter darling," she said, " I don't care whether she left a whole dictionary. I don't care if her finger prints were all over the place. I don't care where the gun was. I don't care if her room held enough poison to supply the whole Borgia family. If she's the type of woman you say she is, she didn't do it. Not like that, she didn't."

" Still, people do very astonishing things sometimes."

" Of course they do. But the astonishingness is always in line with other astonishing things about them, if you see what I mean. The real thing to look out for," Barbara added after a long and meditative pause, " is whether she really was altogether the sort of person you make out. There might have been other

things about her which we don't know, to make it quite understandable."

"That's one reason I wanted you to come down," Peter said. "Or no, it isn't either, because I did not think of it till just now. But this young daughter, Allison, has had about all she can stand. She's all warped by the atmosphere she's been living in. I want you to try to straighten her out—but I don't think it can be done unless we get clean to the bottom of her mother's death. And while we're trying to do that, I believe you could help by doing all you can for Allison. Perhaps through her we can get a better understanding of the whole situation."

"Well," Barbara gasped, "it's a nice light little job you've wished on me. I'm not a detective, or a professional psychologist—or even a reporter. If ever there is such a thing as a universal amateur, I'm it."

"It's a worth-while job," Peter said softly. "There's a young chap here, Jerry Dean. He's just a cub correspondent, but there's good stuff in him. He's in love with Allison; but love, as she's seen its manifestations, isn't a matter of roses and moonlight. It wasn't so long ago, Barbara, since you and I—— Anyway, I'd kind of like to help Jerry out."

"Love isn't roses and moonlight to me, either, Peter dear. It's more like freshly baked bread, and sunshine, and maybe pine trees. That's why—I'll take the job."

## CHAPTER IX

"Well," Peter drawled, "I suppose the time has come when we'll have to get to work."

It was Peter's settled pose that he hated work. He made no mention to Jerry of the somewhat crowded hours he had put in since he left the cub correspondent on the doorstep of the Asbury place the previous evening. He was leaning back at his ease, tamping tobacco

into his pipe and surveying the wreckage of a substantial breakfast which still cluttered the table in one corner of the hotel dining-room. But there was a gleam in Peter's gray eyes, behind their thick glasses. When Peter affected laziness the chances were that he was particularly alert.

" It's going to be your turn to-day," he added, " so I hope you feel energetic."

" The quicker we get the whole thing straightened out, the better. Now that Mrs. Piper's come to stay with Allison I feel better about leaving her and coming into town."

Peter still experienced a distinct thrill at hearing Barbara referred to as " Mrs. Piper." But Peter was under the illusion that he abhorred sentiment.

" Well, you really do have a job on the *Herald,* you know—and so far as I've heard, sitting permanently on Allison's doorstep isn't it." He spoke curtly, to hide that flash of pleasure at the sound of " Mrs. Piper,"

Jerry's flush inundated even the freckles on his short, stubborn nose.

" I guess I deserved that," he said. " What do you want me to do?"

Peter's face was slit by its widest grin.

" Hip, hip, hurray! That's for you, because you haven't the vanity that takes offence at a dig when you've earned it. I suppose, like everybody else around here, you know every one in town? That's one of the complications in this case, but it may come in handy, at that."

" Well, I lived here all my life until I went away to college."

" The coroner, for instance?"

" Sure! He was our family doctor when I came into the world."

" I might have known it. And I suppose the chief of police was your corner traffic cop, and you went to school with the telephone operator."

" Not the chief of police. He came up from south of

the railroad tracks and runs with a different crowd. I used to do my share in shying rocks back and forth between his gang and ours when I was a kid, of course."

"Something tells me it's barely possible the chief of police may think a few more rocks are being shied at him before we're through. He's too damn smart."

"He's smart enough." There was no admiration of the chief's smartness in Jerry's tone. "As for Edie Grainge, she's ten years older than I am, but I've always known her. She wouldn't thank me for remembering that ten years so accurately, either."

"Let's get back to the corner for a moment. He'd talk to you readily enough, wouldn't he?"

"He'd begin by patting me on the head. He still thinks of me as being in about the sixth grade in school."

"The first thing you do, then, is to go and see him. Find out exactly how that body was lying when he saw it night before last."

"Anything specific you want to find out?" Jerry was leaning forward across the table, his elbows planted between the coffee cup and the finger bowl. It was Jerry's first big story, and Peter was pleased to note the dawning realisation of it in his eyes—the zest of pursuit which makes the true reporter, when on a real job, the most impersonal, ruthless, and joyous creature in existence.

"I don't know what there is to find out. That's why I don't want you to miss anything," Peter informed him. "If you never looked for anything until you knew what you were looking for, you'd find yourself scooped with dismal regularity. The next thing is to find out all you can about Asbury."

"Oh, I know quite a lot about Asbury already!" Jerry said eagerly.

"No doubt you do. But we can't trust to gossip. Check up on it—all of it. Can you do that?"

"Well," Jerry mused, "one of his drivers lived on the ranch next to ours till he grew up. We used to shoot

squirrels together, and we still go fishing every once in a while. And there's a fellow that plays around with him a lot. He runs a pool room now, but he and I were chums up through the first year of high school, when he dropped out. I go round there every so often just to chin with Bill."

"Thank God, you're a natural-born democrat!" Peter exclaimed.

Jerry gazed across the table at him in innocent astonishment.

"But that's not it at all! Nobody thinks of it that way. Just because I went to college and some of the other kids didn't is no reason I shouldn't like 'em any more, is it?"

"Last night," Peter said solemnly, "I cast a few mental aspersions on the interlocking affairs of a small town. I take it all back. It works both ways. You meet me here for lunch, with those reports. The lunch will be on the *Herald* expense account. And if you can pick a bottle of alleged Scotch as good as what the sheriff gave me last night, from the same source if possible, we'll contrive to insert that into the expense account too."

Jerry's eyes clouded.

"I—I'd be glad to buy it for you," he said with embarrassed shyness.

"Forget it! Jimmy will know what the money went for. It isn't so many years since he was out on assignments himself. We just dress up the label for the accounting department, and the accounting department knows perfectly well, too. So that's that. Meanwhile, I'm going around to interview your little chum, Edie Grainge. Not that it matters so much, but I've got to nurse this story along with some perfectly innocuous little features, to keep it alive till the inquest. By the way, will she be willing to talk?"

"Will she be willing to talk!" Jerry snorted. "Say, Edie Grainge spells her name E-d-y-t-h-e, and her favourite author is Ethel M. Dell. She's been waiting

thirty years for something thrilling to happen to her. She even gets a thrill out of an ice-cream soda at the drug-store counter. I'll bet that right now Edie Grainge thinks she was the luckiest girl in the world because she was the one that plugged in that telephone call. She probably regards it as a delayed answer to thirty years of prayer. Will she talk? Will she miss the only chance in her life of being interviewed for a big city daily?"

"Do you know where she lives?" Peter unwound his long legs and hunched himself out of his chair.

"Brown frame house at the corner of Spruce and Elm. There's a sign in the front window—her mother takes in sewing. Everybody knows the place."

"They *would*," Peter chortled.

As he walked up the neatly swept cement path leading to the brown house a quarter of an hour later, his eye caught the movement of a curtain twitched aside and the white blur of a face at the window. By the time he had mounted the short flight of wooden steps to the front door, however, the curtain had dropped back into position and the face had vanished. There was a sound of scurrying in the hall, followed by a voice insisting in a piercing whisper: "Oh, Mother! I'm sure it's for me!" A door slammed—a slam that to Peter's ears registered defeat and annoyance. Just as Peter had lifted his finger to punch the bell a second time the front door opened.

Peter swept his battered felt hat from his head with one hand and with the other produced a card. Both gestures were performed with more than a suggestion of flourish.

"I'm Peter Piper, special writer for the *Herald*," he announced impressively. "I wonder if I might speak to Miss Edythe Grainge?"

"This is Miss Grainge," the figure in the doorway began primly; then added in irrepressible triumph: "I *told* Mother it would be for me!"

"Of course it would. You've become quite a famous

person of late. I came all the way down from the city to see you."

"Did you really? Well, it just was exciting, I can tell you. I've never been interviewed before, but I'd be glad to tell you all there is to tell. Won't you come in? I'm afraid I'm not dressed for callers. You'll have to excuse me, won't you?"

There was a warm friendliness in Peter's smile as he sat down in one of the imitation leather chairs that furnished the small living-room. A dress form stood in one corner, and a cutting table occupied most of the space between the two windows.

"I'm sorry the room's so cluttered up—Mother sews, you know," Miss Grainge apologised.

"Oh, I'm used to that. My wife makes all her own dresses." Barbara, Peter knew perfectly well, seldom used a needle and thread for any more extensive operation than sewing on a loose button, but he set this down as one of the whitest lies he had ever told. The girl who had waited thirty years for melodrama to touch her limited existence (he was sure that, despite those thirty years, she thought of herself as a "girl"), should not think her surroundings unequal to the great occasion—not if he could help it. Peter was not in the business of poking flies into anybody's ointment.

"You were the very first person to know that anything was wrong at the Asbury place," he said. "That makes you really important, you see."

"And to think, if it had happened twenty minutes later I'd have been off duty!" Miss Grainge accepted the inscrutable accident of her good fortune almost with awe.

"You'll have to go over it all later, at the inquest, of course. That's why I want you to think about it very carefully now, so that you won't make any mistake. Just sink yourself right back into Tuesday night and listen. I want you to remember every word that you heard over the telephone—not the way you've thought about it since, but the way it sounded then.

Forget your own voice, forget the way you've told about it to your mother and your friends. Just forget everything else and listen to that other voice until you're sure. The precise wording of that message is simply no end important."

## CHAPTER X

"I'LL never forget it if I live to be a hundred!" Miss Grainge leaned forward. With her eyes snapping with excitement and that faint beatific smile on her lips she was almost pretty.

"It was just seventeen minutes to ten, I'm on duty until ten in the evening, but people go to bed early in Medbury, so there are never many calls the last hour. Then the little red light flashed on, and I plugged in. It was a woman's voice."

"You didn't recognise the voice?"

"No," Miss Grainge admitted regretfully. "I know Mrs. Asbury to see her on the street, of course, but I wouldn't know her voice."

"That's all right," Peter reassured her. "Give me, just as exactly as you can, what happened."

"I wrote it down directly afterwards, so I'd be sure there was no mistake."

"Good girl!" Peter beamed upon her. "You weren't caught napping."

Caught napping—after all those years of waiting for something, anything, to happen? Caught napping when it finally did happen, like something out of a book? Not she!

"The first word was 'Operator,' quite loud. Then a pause—maybe a second or two. Then 'Operator,' again. 'I'm dying—he's killing me! Operator! Operator!' That was all. I called to the supervisor, 'Something serious has happened at the Asbury place.' She came over and took my headpiece and listened in; but there was nothing more. Then she had me call the

sheriff's house. The connection was still open—that is, the receiver on the Asbury line was still off the hook—when I went off duty at ten."

Peter's pencil ceased racing across the copy paper.

"You didn't hear any bumps or thuds or anything—any sound of a struggle?"

"No. All I heard was the sound of somebody breathing."

"Nor the shot?"

"No." Miss Grainge was clearly disappointed that she had been cheated of the shot. "You see, during the time when the supervisor was taking off my headpiece and putting it on, nobody was listening in. Do you suppose we both missed the shot, in that minute?"

"It might easily have been like that. Did the supervisor keep on listening?"

"No, when she didn't hear anything she took the headpiece off and helped me look up the sheriff's house, when I couldn't raise any one at his office."

"Did she hear the breathing?" Peter looked up quickly.

"She didn't notice. I asked her about that. It—it's the first time anything like that has happened, you see, so I was curious. But she couldn't remember."

"Well, you're a brick for remembering, anyhow."

Peter rose. He was in a hurry to be gone, to study that telephone call, word for word. With all the people in the world who remember only the gist of a conversation, with unconscious interpolations of their own, this one girl, he knew, had remembered with perfect accuracy. She had even noted the pauses, the breathing, the exact time. The words of that telephone call were something absolutely definite to go on. But as he picked up his hat to leave, something wistful in the drab little face stopped him.

"Is that—all?" She was like a child after a party, when the lights are being turned off, one after another, knowing that the world will be its commonplace self again in the morning.

Lord, how she was enjoying it! But if she hadn't enjoyed it, hadn't begun on the instant to respond to the thrill of it, she would never have written down the words of the telephone call while they were still fresh in her memory, would never have recalled that touch, with its quiet vividness of horror—the sound of breathing in the room where, a few moments later, a woman had been found lying on the floor, a woman who would never breathe again.

"Oh, yes, there is something else—I was almost forgetting. Won't you let us have your picture for the *Herald?*"

"Oh! Do you really want it? It isn't a very good one." Quickly, as if she feared he might change his mind, she took a photograph from the mantel and handed it to him. "And would you—could you—let me see a copy of the paper when it comes out?"

"Surest thing you know. I'll tell the office to mail you a dozen clippings."

Peter knew exactly how the art department would regard that prim, stiffly smiling face. But it was going to be run.

"Damn your eyes, Jimmy," Peter mentally apostrophised the city editor. "That picture is going to be marked, 'Must Go,' if it's the last act! And if it were properly captioned, which it won't be, it would be headed, 'One crowded hour of glorious life.' Poor thing! But poor or not, you've reason to be gol-darned grateful to her, and you're not going to let her be disappointed."

Peter mailed the photograph on his way back to the hotel, with an emphatic and sulphurous memorandum to Jimmy. Then he stretched himself on the bed in his room, considering the precise wording of the telephone call. The longer he considered it, the more gloomy he became.

What would you say if you were in imminent danger of your life and were calling for aid? "Help!" most likely, maybe "Murder!" But why stop to telephone

at all? Why not be trying to escape from the room or to wrench the gun away? No one could possibly get there in response to the call in time to be of any aid. Still, if you were at your wit's end with terror, you might not think of that.

On the other hand, if you were engaged in murdering some one, and the victim got to the telephone, would you give her time to deliver the message, with all those pauses, the word "operator" three times repeated? The shot should have cut across the message before it was completed. But if you were being killed and had given up all hope you'd surely shout the name of your assailant—always supposing that you knew who it was.

Then there was that phrase, "I'm dying." The other phrase, "He's killing me," fitted in all right, but if you were about to be killed you'd hardly put it that you were dying. Could the assailant have fired his shot and fled, and the woman have dragged herself to the telephone, then fallen backward to the floor? Not with that particular shot. Peter remembered the room with its spattered walls and ceiling. Death had been instantaneous, that was certain.

But there was no sound of a struggle. That, and the words, "I'm dying," together with the time in which she was allowed to speak without interruption, pointed to suicide. Only, if the message were part of a deliberately constructed plot against Asbury, wouldn't there have been the sound of a struggle? Wouldn't she have knocked over a chair or something? And why, on that assumption, and equally on the other assumption that the message was an appeal born by desperate need, had she said only "he" instead of mentioning Asbury's name?

"It's equally bad either way," Peter groaned. "However you turn it and twist it, it simply won't fit. And yet it happened."

Whereupon he banged his feet to the floor and slammed off the cover of his portable typewriter.

" Miss Edythe Grainge, young and pretty telephone operator at Medbury, is to-day a heroine. Her quickness of wit——"

Peter's fingers paused in their rapid banging of the keys.

" Gosh, I hope Jimmy never sees her," he muttered. " I'll tell 'em the photograph failed to do her justice. And so, in a way, it did."

## CHAPTER XI

" Come in!" Peter called above the clatter of his typewriter. He nodded over his shoulder to Jerry, and then, with a final fanfare of rattling keys, ripped the last sheet of his story from the carriage and stooped to gather up the pages which strewed the floor beside him.

Jerry drew a package wrapped in brown paper from inside his coat and laid it on the foot of the bed.

" Here's your stuff—it's the same as the sheriff's, all right."

" Thanks. But at the moment my consuming thirst is for information." Peter retrieved the last of his pages from under the bed, fished a paper clip from the miscellany in his coat pocket, and leaned back in his chair. " Say on."

" Well, in the first place," Jerry's freckled face was solemn, " her feet were crossed." He sat down on the bed and stared with troubled eyes at the floor.

" The deuce they were!" The front legs of Peter's chair came down with a bang. He raked his hands through his black hair, obliterating its part—a sign of extreme perturbation.

" Well, they were," Jerry repeated dejectedly. " Her hands were flung above her head, but her feet were crossed."

" I already grasped that," Peter snapped irritably, " I suppose the coroner, following the lead of the chief

of police, thinks that she blew the top of her head off and then, having been instantly killed, proceeded to cross her feet."

Jerry, his elbow propped on the footboard of the bed, leaned his head on his hand and made no reply.

"But on the other hand," Peter stormed, "what murderer who has just fired off a gun which must have made a hell of a racket would calmly pause to cross his victim's feet for no reason at all? Hell's bells! Is there one single feature in this case that can't be read two ways and make no sense either way you take it?"

"This makes a sort of sense, the way they figure it," Jerry mumbled. He looked up, regarding Peter with eyes of sick despair. "You see, they say that she sat on the floor with her knees bent and feet crossed, Turk fashion. Then, when she fell backward, her knees straightened out but her feet stayed crossed. I've tried it," he added gloomily, "and it would be like that."

All the usual animation was wiped from Peter's face. His mouth was pressed in a thin straight line. The corners of his nostrils looked white and pinched, and the eyes behind his shining glasses were dull as dead water. For a long moment he said nothing.

"I don't see any way to get around that," he said at last in a flat, discouraged voice. "I don't see any way at all. They're right. Damn their eyes, they must be right.

"You think——"

"I'm parking those crossed feet where I won't forget 'em. But they're not the only point in the puzzle. There's plenty more. Go on, what else did you find out? How about Asbury, for instance?"

"Oh, Asbury! I was almost forgetting about him."

"From now on we're not going to let anything make us forget about anything else." Peter's wide grin brought an answering smile to Jerry's despondent face.

"Well, Asbury's the last person in the world you'd pick for a grand passion. The wonder is, how he stuck to Mrs. Cole for six years. He's quite a lady's man.

Not a lounge lizard, you know; more than the great-open-spaces type that kids them along. Nothing serious, you understand—just light affairs. I don't believe it was even his fault, in a way, that he got so deeply involved with Mrs. Cole. He was only twenty when it began.

" Anyway, he's been trying to pull away from her, to escape to something less intense and tempestuous, for some time. That's why she bought the ranch and brought him here—thought she'd segregate him, get him away from temptation. But it didn't work. He's been going with at least three different girls around town; three whose names I got, maybe more. About six months ago Mrs. Cole hid the key to the car when she suspected him of coming into town to keep a date. That made him so mad that he left the ranch for good and set up in the express business."

" He hasn't done so badly for himself, at that," Peter observed cynically. " He even got the car back, I take it."

" Oh, yes, he got it back. Mrs. Cole had actually given it to him, and it was registered in his name. But things haven't run so smoothly, nevertheless. Mrs. Cole kept writing him letters, and he's been back to the ranch several times, trying to get her to call it quits. It's a strange thing for a cultivated, educated woman to do, but she followed him into town and made scenes on the street. She came into Bill's pool room one evening and tried to find out from Bill where Asbury was. She was so obsessed with jealousy that she was almost crazy—at least, Bill thought so."

" The primrose path seems to have developed some thorns for friend Asbury." Peter's grin was not without a hint of malice.

" Worse than that. I went around to see the driver of one of Asbury's vans—the chap I was telling you about. He says that Mrs Asbury—everybody calls her that, you know—had done her best to wreck Asbury's business. She went around telling his customers that

if they would only stop employing him he'd be forced to go back to her. She was trying to break him, so that he'd be financially dependent on her."

"Whew!" Peter whistled. "Well, it begins to look as if the young man might have got wrought up to the pitch of murder without any one blaming him much."

"He wasn't so much angry about it as worried. He'd show her letters to Bill and ask his advice as to what he should do about it. He was completely out of his depth in dealing with a woman like that. Mrs. Cole was not an ordinary woman. She had been beautiful, and she had been—or thought she had been—beloved.

"Her letters weren't mush. Bill remembered some of the phrases. They were tragic—the tragedy of a violent, tenacious woman in the grip of an overmastering passion. If this ended, everything ended. And she had given up everything for it, her place in society, the honour of her family, her wealth, her name. She couldn't let go—it would have been a drop into absolute nothingness. She didn't reason about it. She just clutched frantically at any device at all to keep him. Of course, it would have been a fool's paradise, even if pity had taken him back to her. But she wasn't weighing paradises—she was in hell."

"I somehow can't see him feeling sorry for her—not sorry enough, anyhow—under those tactics," Peter murmured.

"No, he didn't. He felt badgered. He told Bill that he had about reached the end of his rope, that he couldn't stand much more of it. He said he'd got to the point where he would do anything—anything at all—to get loose, if only he knew what to do. He was like a character in a musical comedy who finds himself cast for the leading rôle in a Shakespearean tragedy." Jerry smiled his shy, embarrassed smile. "Maybe that sounds ridiculous, in a place like Medbury."

"Well, I never heard that population had much to do with human behaviour," Peter said. "By the way,

how did Asbury work up enough business to make him financially independent in six months?"

"Bootlegging," Jerry answered succinctly.

"Oh—ho!" Peter crowed. "And did the lady know about that?"

"No, she didn't. But he was dead scared she'd find it out. The express business was hardly more than a blind."

"And if she'd found it out she could have upset the applecart for fair. She might even have got a penitentiary sentence for him. The motives seem to be thickening up around our young friend's head. You're dead certain about that bootlegging business, are you?"

"Certain. And it's a fairly big business. He didn't have the money to put up for it himself. He had backing somewhere. I'll give you this for what it's worth. Jack told me—that's the driver I used to shy rocks with—that the chief of police and Asbury have been bosom friends ever since he moved to town. Harris telephones down pretty often to ask Asbury to send out for an express package. And whenever he does Asbury drives the wagon himself.

"One time Jack remembered that he'd left his wallet in his driver's coat at the garage and went back for it when the place was closed for the night. He went in the back way and noticed a light in the office. He supposed the light had been left on by mistake, but when he got nearer he heard voices. He came up quietly, thinking it might be hold-up men getting into the till, but when he looked through the glass pane in the door, there were Asbury and Harris, going over the books together, like partners. He figured it was none of his business, so he said nothing until we got to gossiping about Harris to-day."

"Well," Peter said sceptically, "that sounds like an odd occupation for the chief of police to engage in. Neither you nor Jack has ever much personal affection for Harris, I take it."

"Sure we don't think much of Harris! Never did.

He belongs to the roughneck element in town, and always has. That bunch from the other side of the tracks got into control at the last election and put Harris in. He's smart enough, but his political activities were never the kind to be exactly proud of."

"Talk about big city corruption!" Peter spread his hands in ironic admiration.

"Of course I can't say for sure that Harris is behind Asbury's bootlegging business, but I do know that Harris has steered all the trade of the city and county officials Asbury's way. He's got 'em in a position where they'll have to protect Asbury if they don't want to be shown up themselves. Besides, he puts out sound stuff, and that's something worth cherishing, these days."

"The sheriff, for instance?"

"Sure, that's where he gets it. Asbury might almost be called official bootlegger of Medbury county. The sheriff's honest as they make 'em, but he'd never believe that any one who put out as good a brand of home-made Scotch as Asbury does would ever commit a crime. Especially when Harris, whom Rondel admires and believes in because he is quick as Rondel is slow, says it all happened some other way."

"Whoop-ee! A far shot, and it hit the bull's eye! I guess Jimmy won't jib at *that* bottle going on the expense account." Peter picked up the package from the bed, unwrapped it, and held it to the light, squinting one eye.

"If he'd known where this one particular bottle was going, he might have put some wood alcohol into it, at that," he chuckled.

## CHAPTER XII

THE late summer dusk had already fallen when Peter brought Bossy to a stop just behind another car already parked in front of Asbury's boarding house on Vine Street. The car in front was a La Salle, and it was painted a light robin's-egg blue.

Instead of mounting the steps at once Peter squeezed himself between Bossy and the rear bumper of the La Salle and busied himself attentively and needlessly with the radiator cap of his own machine. He stooped to investigate the condition of Bossy's front tyre, but as he fussed about, his gaze was unobtrusively fixed on the rear fender and the tyre tread of the other car. Still stooping, he drew a slip of paper from his pocket and glanced at the four diagrams in its upper corner. Then, whistling dolefully, he ran up the steps and rang the bell.

" Mr. As-bur-*ee!* Gentleman to see you!"

In response to Peter's request, the landlady stood at the front of the stairs leading to the upper floor and sent her voice upward with a vigour worthy of a hog-calling contest. She was a frequent exponent of the theory of " letting her head save her heels "—which meant that she never delivered a message on foot when the recipient was within earshot.

A door opened above, and a moment later a dim figure materialised, leaning over the stair rail and peering down into the unlighted hall. Peter brushed past the landlady and ran briskly up the stairs. The figure turned quickly and barred his further passage, one hand on the banister and the other braced against the wall.

" You don't know me, but my name's Piper," Peter said in a tone too low to carry to the landlady's listening ears. " I'm a friend of the sheriff, and I have some information for you. I think maybe you'd rather have me give it to you in private."

Asbury leaned forward warily, still blocking the passage.

" I never heard of you," he said, after an ineffectual attempt to study Peter's face in the semi-darkness, " and I don't need any information."

" You needn't act as if you thought I was a prohi agent—I'm not." The figure on the stairs above straightened. Peter saw that his shot had struck home.

"Everybody's a friend of Rondel," Asbury said testily.

"Very true, he's a friendly soul. But you can't tell whether you're interested in my information or not until I give it to you," Peter said reasonably. "Contrary to popular belief, it's the things you don't know that are most likely to hurt you. And you can always kick me out if you don't like it, you know."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Asbury said grudgingly. But he dropped his hands and turned to lead the way along the passage. "If you try any funny business, you won't get very far."

"I was never less humorous," Peter assured him.

Asbury flung open the door into a lighted room.

"Now, then, what's all the mystery?" he demanded.

Peter closed the door gently behind him and without waiting for an invitation settled himself in one of the straight bedroom chairs, his long legs thrust out before him and his shoulders hunched against the chair back. Asbury continued to stand in the middle of the room, his hands in his pockets.

"You're right, it is a bit of a mystery," Peter agreed politely. "But I'm sure you'll do your best to solve it. It's about Mrs. Asbury."

"There isn't any Mrs. Asbury."

"Oh, yes, I know." Peter returned Asbury's belligerent stare with utmost cheerfulness. "Courtesy title only. Mrs. Cole, then. I believe you said you were not at the ranch at all on the night of her death?"

"What's that to you? I'm not answering questions for anybody but the police, and I've already satisfied them as to where I was. If you're a dick with Sherlock Holmes ambitions you can go see the chief. He's in charge of the case, I believe."

"Do I look like a dick?" Peter grinned impudently into the set face of the man before him.

Asbury's eyes were narrowed to gray-green slits. Although his hands remained in his pockets, his whole frame stiffened. It flashed across Peter's mind that if

Asbury had been a four-footed animal he would be crouching tensely now, with ears laid back—and that humanity had lost a very expressive feature in developing stationary ears. The fancy lifted the corners of his mouth in a whimsical curve. He slumped still further into the chair, the picture of a lazy young man very much at his ease. "I'm not a dick," he repeated. "Maybe I belong to an even lower order of creation. I'm a newspaper reporter."

"I've nothing to say to any reporters—and it's just about time for you to get out of here and quit meddling in private affairs that are none of your business." The line of Asbury's out-thrust jaw as he spoke through clenched teeth boded ill for any too persistent member of the press.

"Oh, ye-es?" Peter drawled on a rising inflection. One eyebrow cocked upward at an acute angle, but not a line of his relaxed pose was altered. "But it was I who had something to say to you, you know. As for instance, I have proof that you didn't think quickly enough when you denied that you were at the ranch night before last—because you really were there."

Silence gripped the room. Asbury's eyes locked glances with Peter's, apparently determined to stare him down. Peter shrugged almost imperceptibly. He had not the slightest interest in meeting the challenge of that belligerent stare. Instead, he allowed his gaze to wander, with a fine air of casualness, over the figure in the centre of the room.

He saw a lithe, sinewy body, not devoid of supple, muscular grace—the grace in strength of one of the larger cats. The face barely missed handsomeness, with its curly light-brown hair brushed back from the temples, heavily modelled nose, bright, close-set eyes, and square chin. It would take only a slight touch of romantic imagination to see him as a hero of the "great open spaces." But there was something insensitive and selfish in the long, thin mouth—a hint of the unconscious cruelty of arrogance and easy mastery. Peter

scarcely stopped to analyse the impression. But he instinctively catalogued Asbury as a man who sought his own way without too much reflection—and he had a hunch that the taint of cruelty always spells weakness. It was Asbury in the end who shifted his gaze, finding it disregarded, and flung himself into a chair. His movement was an unconscious admission of defeat in the first skirmish.

"What is it you think you know—since you know so much?" The sneer was defensive.

"Don't imagine that I'm running away with the idea that you killed her—though I don't think you're particularly sorry she's out of your way." Peter's voice remained studiously friendly.

"I'm sorry she went—like that," Asbury growled. "But—well, everybody knows that she was making things pretty unpleasant. It's a relief to be out of it—on any terms."

In that relief Peter detected the first note of unguarded sincerity. Asbury patently thought of Mrs. Cole's death in its immediate effect upon himself. There was no pity for the dead woman, no remembrance of her agony, not even a look beyond the future complications which might be in store for Asbury himself as a result of her violent death.

"However, you're not out of the woods yet, despite the willingness of the chief of police to let well enough alone," Peter suggested amicably. "For instance, you were at the ranch on the night before last."

"I've said I wasn't." Again the steady stare and defiant out-thrust chin.

"That was a mistake," Peter announced suavely. "If you've got an alibi for the half hour between nine-thirty and ten you'd better get busy on it. It's always a good first-aid measure in a jam to tell as much of the truth as you possibly can."

"I wasn't——" Asbury's eyes were still steady, but his voice wavered almost imperceptibly.

"You see," Peter interrupted, "there were fresh

wheel marks from your car on the ranch driveway. I've checked up on the type pattern—and lest you remark that hundreds of cars use the same make, I'll remind you of the patch on your left rear tyre. You also left in such a hurry that you turned too short and scraped a fleck of paint from your fender on the post as you went out. It's a peculiar shade of paint, you know, and besides, there's the scratch on your fender—quite a fresh scratch. Some of the stems of the vine leaves on the post were broken off, and broken so recently that the leaves were only drooping, not yet withered. Just reflect on that a bit, and I think you'll begin to see the importance of that alibi—if you have one."

"Look here, are you accusing me——?" Asbury half leaped from his seat, his fists threateningly drawn back.

"I'm not accusing you of premeditated murder——"

"Murder!" The word was hoarse in Ashbury's throat. He sank back, staring at the floor.

"For a variety of reasons," Peter went on as if he had not heard the interruption. "One of them is, that unless you were an utter fool, you'd have thought of changing your tyres afterward. All I've said was that Mrs. Cole's death is not going to be dropped as calmly as the chief of police is dropping it. Everything may be just as he said, but if it is, a number of dark gentlemen are going to emerge from the woodpile before the fact's established. Now if you will allow me, I'd suggest that you tell me what you really did at the ranch—and afterward—so that your explanation can go into the same story for the *Herald* as the one I am going to write, refuting your first statement that you were not there."

## CHAPTER XIII

"My God, why couldn't she let me be?" Asbury's eyes were no longer defiant. He stared across the room with the look of one haunted—a look curiously blended of fear and bewildered protest, as if a man who has scoffed at ghosts had been brought face to face with a spectre. "Even now, even after she's dead—she said she'd never let me go, that she'd ruin me first. She said once that she'd follow me to hell. Well, maybe she's sending me there!" A grim smile tightened the corners of Asbury's mouth in a nervous twitching, without humour. "If it comes out that I was there the night it—happened it's going to look pretty bad for me, isn't it?"

"Not as bad as if it came out that you persisted in saying you weren't there," Peter reminded him calmly.

"Harris said it would be all right. That's what I get for believing him! I might have known somebody would come butting in." Asbury's tone was bitter.

"Quite," Peter agreed.

Asbury brought his clenched fists down on his knees, pounding them in a gesture of futile violence. He was caught. He wanted to fight his way out, and there was nothing tangible to strike against. He had never asked for life to become complicated like this. He did not know whether he was a fool to talk to Peter, whether he should have left everything to Harris, as Harris had told him to do. But he had left it to Harris, and look where it had landed him! If the papers made a fuss, maybe Harris couldn't even handle the coroner's jury. Harris wouldn't dare to go too far. And even if he got the coroner's verdict there might still be a grand jury indictment. He had listened to Harris—and as a result he saw a murder charge staring him in the face.

Asbury's brows knit in the difficult effort to think his way out. He was not used to having to think things

through. He wanted to take things as they came, one at a time—simple things, that could be met by direct action. He had never thought much about other people. If he had known how to manage Natalie—but it was too late for that, now. Natalie had her hooks into him —Natalie, dead. Alive, when she made things intolerable, he had weighed nothing, thought of nothing but the immediate need of flinging away from the source of discomfort. Now that she was dead he could not get away from her.

"Look here," Asbury exclaimed sharply, "do you think I killed her?" Better know where this guy stood. Let it depend on his answer. It might be a good thing to talk it over with some one—some one on the outside, with no interests to cover. Maybe the fellow would believe him—would be on his side. If the papers were going to raise a row they could hound him into that murder charge without half trying.

"I haven't the least idea," Peter said cheerfully.

Asbury looked up, startled. Of all answers, this was the one he had least expected. But it had a simplicity, a directness, that appealed to him.

"I'll tell you how it was," he said, flinging his shoulders back wearily. "I did go to the ranch that night. Maybe you know how it was with us." He paused interrogatingly.

"Somewhat." Peter was non-committal.

"I was through, and she wouldn't believe it. I kept telling her to lay off me. Gosh, if I'd known what I was being let in for! Say, if I go back to the beginning —it may seem funny to you that I could hit a woman. If I go back to the start, you won't put it in the paper, will you?"

"No, I won't." Peter's voice was unemphatic.

Asbury fixed him again with that hard, belligerent stare.

"I believe you," he said, after a pause. "I've never told anybody how I got into this mess. Maybe it's time I did. I've been more or less of a roughneck, and I

talk like one, but I was brought up to be decent. My mother was a widow, without much money, but she gave me the right kind of training. It may seem queer to you, but when I first met Natalie, though I was past twenty, I was just a kid. Ever since I was thirteen, I'd had to work summers to help Mother out. I was kept pretty busy, and I was always keen on the out-of-doors. All I knew about women was silly little puppy affairs with high-school girls—going to parties where you ate ice cream—that sort of thing." Asbury's voice was hard and scornful. But under the hardness and the scorn Peter detected a hidden wistfulness.

"Sure," Peter said quietly. "And then you got the job as ranger and met Mrs. Cole." He paused encouragingly.

"You'll think I was a fool. But always up till then I'd gone straight—absolutely. It's God's truth that I was off at the deep end before I knew what it was all about. Natalie was years older than I. Her husband was all wrapped up in business. She was at loose ends. I don't suppose she could help it. She had to have love, the way a dope fiend has to have drugs. It was like something that got hold of her from the outside.

"Of course, I didn't know all that then. I don't know that I've ever figured it out as clearly as this before. But she fell for me. And I didn't know what she was up to, where it was leading, till—well, all of a sudden, it was out of my control. I—I'd lost my head completely, gone so far I couldn't stop. It seems funny now to look back on. But, for one thing, she was beautiful, and for another, she knew what she wanted, and went after it. I've just about hated her lately, but I see now that she couldn't help it."

Peter pulled his pipe from his pocket and gazed meditatively into the bowl as he filled it with tobacco. One eyebrow was cocked at an inquiring angle. Passion that was not allowed to lapse into indifference might well turn to hate. Asbury did not look like a man whose emotions, either of love or hate, would be

deep enough to lead him to risk his life by committing a murder. On the other hand, if sufficiently driven, he might easily resort to unconsidered violence.

Was Peter about to listen to a confession of murder? For the first time in his life Asbury felt the need of being understood. Life in its simple, objective terms had become too much for him. Curiosity fought in Peter with his sense of fair play. If Asbury admitted that he did it Peter could not hold to his promise of secrecy. He couldn't let a man chattily recount a murder and do nothing about it. Peter wanted desperately to know. He would do his best to find out. But he couldn't let Asbury tell him—not with that promise in the way.

"I'd be careful if I were you," he said, touching a match to his pipe. "You'd better not talk too freely about hating her. I'm warning you—for your own good."

Asbury made a curious gesture with his hands—as if he were trying to brush away cobwebs. Peter was not even sure that his interruption had been heard.

"She'd thrown it up to me that I ought to be grateful to her—that she gave up everything for me. But I didn't ask her to do it!" His tone was puzzled. Peter found himself touched with an irrational pity for the youth for whom life was meant to be simple and who had been plunged so unwittingly into deep waters.

"The first thing I knew it was already done. I never meant—I never dreamed of anything permanent. But what could I do? There we were. She wouldn't hear of my getting a job. And we had to lie low, anyway, on account of Mr. Cole." With that bewildered frown creasing his forehead, Asbury's hard face was inexplicably boyish. "It just—happened. She wouldn't let me out of her sight. I didn't care at first. Then I tried to play up to her. There didn't seem to be anything else I could do. But after a while—well, I just couldn't stand it any longer. You see how it was?"

Peter nodded. The young man with his hard,

shallow, attractive face, had been hurled into a grand passion for which he was unfitted, wanting his bit of fun, his freedom, wanting only an inch and receiving, so unwillingly, an ell.

" I had to get loose. I couldn't stand it, I tell you! She wouldn't see that it was over, done with. I had to cut loose—at any cost. And I did. I came into town. I was going to be free and have a good time in my own way—not that it meant anything serious. But she couldn't see me look at a girl. She'd bought this ranch, thinking she could keep me away from everybody. And then, when she found I could earn my own living, so that I was no longer dependent on her——"

Asbury's voice faltered into silence. His eyes narrowed in that badgered look of an animal at bay, determined to fight its way out.

Peter's fingers tightened on the stem of his pipe.

" If you killed her, don't tell me!" he said quickly.

" That's not what I'm telling you." Asbury brushed his words aside, glaring into space with those narrowed, ruthless eyes. " She wrote me and begged me to come out—said it would be the last time. But when I got there she wouldn't let me go. She was all dressed up—my God, as if she could get me that way, after six years! She held on to me. I had to hit her—to get loose. That's what I've been leading up to. I never hit a woman before. I told her I had a date. But even after I hit her and she fell back against the wall she followed me out to the car. She got in and said she'd go with me where I was going."

Asbury had forgotten Peter. The words tumbled out pell-mell from the tumultuous confusion of his memory. The sweat stood out in drops on his forehead. He wiped it away, unheeding, with the back of his hand.

" I told her she could stay there then and I'd go and telephone for a taxi. She jumped out and followed me into the kitchen, snatching at the telephone. When her back was turned I rushed out and slammed the door and ran to the car. That's the last I saw of her. The

next thing I knew was when the sheriff came and told me she was—dead."

"What time was that—when you went to the ranch?" Peter's cool voice cut across the turmoil of Asbury's speech.

"How do I know what time it was? I didn't look. But it was early, I know that. It couldn't have been much past eight o'clock—half past, maybe. It was barely dark when I got there, and the whole thing couldn't have lasted more than half or three quarters of an hour."

"And what was the date you had? In other words, where were you between that time and ten o'clock?"

The faint sucking hiss as Peter drew at his pipe was the only sound in the room. It was repeated in undisturbed rhythm again and again, while Peter waited.

"You said there was a place I'd better stop," Asbury said at last in a toneless voice. "You can print that about the quarrel at the ranch. It's all I have to say. I couldn't prove any story I told you about what happened after that. Maybe I've talked too much, anyhow. But I've told all I'm going to tell."

## CHAPTER XIV

"No, I don't think you're morbid to want to stay here, despite Jerry's fulminations. I think, considering everything, you've hung on to a remarkable degree of fundamental good sense."

Barbara lolled under an apple tree in the orchard, both hands propped on the ground behind her, chewing meditatively on the juicy stem of a blade of wild grass. The feathery tip of the grass blade waved back and forth in front of her tip-tilted nose.

"Oh, Jerry!" Allison's tone was impatient, but the impatience concealed a note of pain. "Jerry is so young!"

Allison's dark head leaned back against the rough

gray bark of a tree. Her eyes were still shadowed and tragic, but something of the strained loneliness in her face was smoothed away, leaving it pitifully young. For the first time since childhood had emerged into girlhood, Allison had found a companion—a companion who accepted things without questioning, and whose calm acceptance brought comfort and soothing to her tortured mind.

"Jerry doesn't understand, and I'm glad he can't. That's why I must keep away from him. He doesn't know! Jerry seems to me like this orchard, somehow, with all the clean greenness and the smell of hot sunshine. I love this orchard, even after—after all that's happened in the house here. I know that seems queer."

"It's a beautiful place," Barbara agreed softly. "And beauty is somehow there—permanent, outside us—no matter what we human beings do. We can't really touch the sunshine, can we?"

"That's it! This place is a little patch cut off from the rest of life. Not even what happened inside—inside the house—can make it belong. It's a sort of refuge—sanctuary."

"I don't think it's quite that. I think the orchard is a part of life, too."

"Not real life!" Allison's conviction was so deep that it had no need of emphasis. "Jerry belongs with the orchard, and yet he can't see why I don't want to leave it. He can't see why I couldn't bear for him to get mixed up with—the other things. He doesn't know how horrible it sounds when he talks about—love."

"I don't think you and he mean quite the same thing by love, my dear," Barbara said gently.

"I know. Jerry doesn't realise what he's talking about, or he just—couldn't say such things."

"But are you quite sure that your meaning is the real one?"

"I've had six years of it—I ought to be sure." Allison spoke with desolate finality. "I've run away,

out here, with my fingers in my ears because I couldn't bear to listen any more. I've seen Mother writhe on the floor and tear at her hair with her hands. I remember the day when the sun fell across her hair, and I said, 'Why, there's a white thread caught in your hair!' I reached over to pick it off—but it wasn't a thread. I remember the awful, terrified look in her eyes when I pulled and the thread wouldn't come.

"She locked herself up in her room, and I heard her sobbing. The next day she went to the city and came back with her hair all hennaed. That was before Mr. Asbury went away, of course. When she came back he just looked at her, and there was a look in his eyes—— She didn't see the look. She went over to him—— Ugh!" A shudder shook Allison's shoulders. She reached down and with trembling fingers began to braid three strands of grass together.

"And you a child!" Anger struggled with amazement in Barbara's voice. Her arms stiffened as she clutched the grass behind her so tightly that clumps of it were broken off in her fingers.

"They didn't pay much attention to me, most times—not when they were together," Allison went on. "When Mother had one of her impulses to move they'd just take me along with them. Mother was always moving—trying to find some place where Mr. Asbury wouldn't have the chance to know any one else. She said he was all the world to her, and she didn't need to see any one else, so he shouldn't, either. But he'd get restless soon, in each new place, and slip off without her knowing it. And then when he came back, even if he hadn't gone more than an hour or two, she—— Oh, it seemed to hurt her so that she was beside herself."

Barbara flung a handful of grass with all her strength toward a near-by tree trunk, where it fluttered aimlessly through the air to the ground.

"You ought to have run away!" she exploded.

"What was there to run to?" Allison smiled wanly.

" Besides, when things were not going well with her and Mr. Asbury, Mother clung to me. She would throw her arms around me, with those wrenching sobs, and say that I was all she had in the world. Even if she forgot me between whiles, I guess it was true in a way. She said that I would never forsake her, that she would die if I turned against her. So—— I just couldn't."

" But your father—surely your father was different. Didn't he try to do anything?" Barbara's eyes were wide with horror and pity as she looked down with Allison into the pit of tumultuous, unbridled emotion which was all that the girl had known of human feeling.

" Father was always away so much—always so busy. We children hardly ever felt that we knew him. It was Mother that seemed real, that we cared for. I have an older sister, Elsie, and I think she must have felt that way, too, because after Father found out where we were she and her husband came to visit us. I'm sure she meant well—that she meant somehow to clear things up and make everything come right. Father was terribly embittered. He came, too— several times. He had never the faintest idea that Mother was dissatisfied —until she was gone. He has always been very proud of his name.

" There was a big genealogical chart hanging in his study, and I remember, when I was just a little thing, he'd point out the names on it and tell me the fine things our ancestors had done. He felt that Mother had disgraced us all. He wouldn't divorce her because then it would all come out and people would know. He was furious when he found out that Elsie and her husband had been here. He was a quiet man, who never said much—it was more as if anger ate into him. Then after a long while he would let it out, in little drips. He wanted Mother to leave Asbury and go back to him, because he was afraid people would find out— that it couldn't be kept hidden for ever."

The sentences dropped, detached, with pauses between. The braided strands of grass in Allison's fingers

snapped. She threw them aside without looking up, and picked three others, twisting them into a little knot, her white fingers moving in and out among the green stems.

"He said—he said he loathed her, that he hated to remember that he had ever touched her, he hated the thought that his children were hers also. But he tried to get her to come back for the sake of appearances. He said we were all a plague spot that ought to be wiped out."

"You had to listen to that—you!"

"Oh, yes; I think they hardly noticed that I was in the room. That was rather recently—it was after Mr. Asbury left the ranch and moved into town, but Father didn't know that, of course, and Mother would never believe that Asbury wasn't coming back, so she didn't tell him. Instead of getting used to things in time, Father seemed to brood on them more and more. He was never able to go back into active business after that breakdown six years ago, you see. His mind fastened on this, just as before it had concentrated on his business. He spent his time cruising in his yacht, or travelling, always alone.

"Elsie must have told him that she and John Lawrence—that's her husband—had been here, because it was shortly after that that he came. He said that Mother had corrupted us both, Elsie and me. Probably he was right." There was no change in the monotonous voice nor in the set white face, its dark brows drawn in frowning attention over the blades of grass, as Allison made that monstrous assertion.

## CHAPTER XV

"CHILD, you don't know what you're saying! What do you mean?" Barbara's voice caught in her throat.

"Elsie is like mother in a way. I mean, she's beautiful, and she flings herself into things—when she's angry,

or sad, or happy, she forgets everything else except just that one mood of the moment. And there's something about Asbury—something—I don't know what——" She floundered helplessly and then went on.

" Mr. Asbury was nice to Elsie. They were always joking together, but in a day or two they seemed to have a lot of jokes just to themselves. I could see that John did not like it very well, but he didn't say anything. Mother did not like it, either. But they were here for only a week, so I didn't see that it mattered much, one way or the other. Then one day Mother asked John to drive her into town, and he did. They were gone all day—it was about dusk when they came back. Mr. Asbury and Elsie had gone for a walk, but I heard their voices, so I knew they were back too, and I came in from the orchard, where I'd been reading all afternoon.

" The lights hadn't been turned on yet, but just as I came in they were switched on. I saw at once that they were all fearfully agitated about something. Mr. Asbury and Elsie stood on one side of the table, and Elsie's head was thrown back in that way she has when she's angry. Mr. Asbury leaned against the table, looking bored and sort of mocking, as if he didn't care what happened. John's face was very red, and his fists were drawn back.

" ' I told you not to have anything to do with that man!' he was shouting. ' I told you to stay with Allison and leave him alone!' "

" Elsie laughed then—a short, sharp little laugh.

" ' Well, I'm not on a chain,' she said. ' If you can't stand the most harmless little flirtation without losing your head——'

" ' I was against our coming here in the first place,' he went on as if he hadn't heard her. He looked at the canvas picnic kit that was on the table, then at the grass stains on Elsie's white dress. ' That man is a snake—and I find you here alone with him in the dark——'

" ' I might tell you, though you don't deserve it,' Elsie interrupted in a high, light voice that somehow seemed to slice through the air like the swish of a steel blade, ' that we'd just come in and hadn't had time to turn on the lights.'

" ' I told you how we'd find them!' Mother screamed it over and over until she choked on her sobs. She rushed around the table and I thought she was going to strike Elsie, but Mr. Asbury gripped her two hands by the wrists and held her, while she swayed back and forth, sobbing and screaming. Through it all Asbury did not say one word.

" John turned on Mother then.

" ' Yes, you told me,' he said. His face was purple, with the veins bulging out at the temples. ' I didn't like to see my wife taking up with that—that creature, even in fun, or to be polite, or whatever she said it was. But I wouldn't have said anything, or even thought much, if you hadn't told me it was always like that. You told me that he was always trying to exert his fascinations over women—and that they found him irresistible. You told me, if you and I got out of the way, what we'd find when we came back. And you were right. We found it.'

" ' Mother!' Elsie's face was dead white, and she looked at Mother as if she had never seen her before. ' You said that—about me—to my husband?'

" ' My God, what have I done that I should suffer so!' Mother cried out in that awful sobbing voice. ' Even my own daughter! But you shall not have him. He is mine, I tell you! Mine!'

" Elsie just stood looking at her for a minute with those blazing eyes. When she spoke it was hardly above a whisper, and yet it seemed as if her voice carried beyond the room, as if it could have been heard miles in the air.

" ' Mother!' she said again in that queer, piercing whisper, ' I swear to God that if I had anything in my hands to do it with, I'd kill you where you stand.'

" I think I cried out then. I know that I took hold of Elsie's arm, but she brushed me aside. I couldn't say anything but just, ' Don't! Don't!' over and over. Nobody seemed even to hear me.

" ' You plotted this. You with your ghastly jealousy.' Elsie's voice dropped a full tone, but it still carried far across the room, out into space. ' I think you are too vile to live. And if you've made trouble between me and my husband you shan't live! You deserve to die.'

" ' But, Elsie! Elsie!' I felt as if I were talking through glass, that they would not hear me and yet that somehow I must make them hear. ' Why don't you both tell them that it isn't true?'

" ' What would be the good? Of course they'd lie. I've seen too many of these little flirtations of Elsie's, that she wouldn't give up because she said she couldn't resist plaguing me. Perhaps if I'd been warned, if I'd kept my eyes open, I'd have seen that they weren't so harmless—that they all led to—this.' John's whole face sagged. It's funny that I noticed, in the bright light, how yellow the whites of his eyes were, and how the little blood vessels crisscrossed over them in a web of tiny red lines, as if they were drawn in red ink. He leaned heavily with both hands on the table. If it hadn't been for the table I think he would have slumped to the floor.

" ' I might have known!' he said. ' Like mother, like daughter. It's inheritance. The inheritance of corruption. And with her example——'

" Then he pulled himself erect and crossed over to Elsie, seizing her by the elbow. Mother's sobbing was the only sound in the room. Asbury seemed as helpless as I was. He just looked on, blankly, as if he were watching a play being performed in a foreign language.

" ' We're going to get out of here at once,' he said. All the time they were walking to the door Elsie's eyes never left Mother's face, with that look of implacable anger in them, as if the very look could strike her down.

Asbury had dropped Mother's hands, but she had seized his sleeve, and her head was pressed against it so that I could not see her face.

" ' As for you,' John said, his hand groping for the door knob, ' I hope I may never lay eyes on either of you again, because, if I do, I won't answer for the consequences!' "

Allison lifted one hand and pushed the hair wearily back from her forehead.

" So you see," she said in a small, spent voice, " you see——"

Barbara lifted a fallen leaf from the ground and pressed it hard against her cheek. She felt as if the world were reeling around her, as if she must have that restoring contact with the solid greenness of earthly things. But as she looked at the white face tilted back against the rough tree trunk, with closed eyes but with the dark brows still drawn together in that frown of puzzled pain, the details of Allison's story were momentarily swept out of her mind in the rush of protective sympathy for a child in trouble.

In one instant she had leaped to her feet, and in the next was bent over Allison, gathering that tragic young head close to her heart.

" Darling, darling, that isn't all there is to life—all there is to love," she crooned. " It's just one tiny little dreadful fragment that's hurled off from the rest of reality and hit you. I could kill them all for what they did to you!" Barbara's voice shook with indignation, but her hand continued to stroke Allison's black hair in a slow rhythmic movement. " It's all very dreadful, dear, but the only way on God's earth you can let it hold you and drag you down is if you don't realise that the other things in life are real, too. You know that this orchard is good, and you know that Jerry is good."

Barbara's voice was steadier now, though the tears were falling unheeded on her hands, on Allison's dark hair in which a little gray twig from the apple tree had caught.

"Even *I'm* good, Allison—and so is Peter. We're full of faulty spots, but we belong with the sound, clean things of life that are real. And Peter and I love each other. We quarrel sometimes, but they're nice little spatty quarrels, like the rain in the orchard. If Peter ever wanted to leave me I'd be terribly sorry, but I wouldn't think of trying to hold him—not if he wanted to go. I can't believe he'd ever be quite happy without me, but I want him to be happy, much, much more even than I want him to love me. I'd try not even to let him know how much it hurt—because it's trying not to hurt each other that means the most to us.

"You want to save Jerry—to save him from you, from what you think love is. But it's you who have a great deal to learn, dear. You know so much that is sordid and dreadful, as if you lived all these years among people who were diseased. And so they were! They were emotionally sick. But there's all the rest of the world—the big, hard, healthy world outside, And that's where you belong."

Allison looked up. A tear had fallen on her forehead, and she touched it wonderingly.

"Why, you're crying!" she said in surprise. "You're crying, just as if—as if you knew all these things that have happened and still—still thought they hadn't made me a part of them! As if—as if—you thought I wasn't like them—those others——"

The strained, taut body collapsed in Barbara's arms. Allison was crying—the harsh, difficult crying of one who has never known the easy solace of tears.

"But of course!" Barbara seized her by the shoulders and shook her until the short black hair was whipped across her face. "Darling child, that's what I'm trying to tell you. You belong with us—with Jerry, and Peter, and me, and the orchard. It doesn't matter what any one else has done. You're going to find your way out to us and live there always. And because you've known the other things, the dark, terrible things, you'll be a thousand times stronger and wiser. There'll

never be any one outside your pity or your understanding. You won't forget. I wouldn't want you to forget, and you never could, anyway. You won't even try to. It will be a part of you, but a part that you can use. I don't think you could ever fall into that pitiful, clutching, jealous passion that your mother called love, just because you've seen it, because you know what it means. You'll be safer from the dark abysses than any one else in the world could be who hadn't looked straight into them."

"You really believe that? You believe even that—that I might not be bad for Jerry? That it wasn't—something I got from Mother that was pulling him down there too? You think I needn't make him go away—for his own sake?" The questions, low and tremulous, tumbled over one another.

"No!" Barbara almost shouted, so loudly that a blue jay took immediate flight from the ground to the nearest tree, with a protesting "Chay! Chay!"

"Then—then I can tell you one other thing. You've given me the courage to tell you. There's another reason why I wanted to stay here at the ranch. You make me feel separate from it all—as if we were facing it together, and when we were all together nothing would be so bad that we couldn't face it, nothing so bad that I would have to bear it alone, without dragging any one else in."

"You think," Barbara said very gently, "that it might have been Elsie—or John Lawrence?"

"I don't know. I only know that some one, not Mr. Asbury, was at the ranch just before I came in from the orchard and found her. I heard the sound of a car driving off—not Mr. Asbury's car, because his always back-fires when it starts. I don't know who it was—but I thought, if I waited, they might come back, and I'd know."

## CHAPTER XVI

"I THINK you're on the wrong foot about the women." Jerry flung a page of scribbled notes on the stand at the head of Peter's bed and straddled a chair, leaning his chin on his arms across its back.

"Well, I didn't have much of a foot, at that." Peter surveyed the members referred to, which were at the moment elevated to the rim of the footboard while he lay at full length, his fingers linked behind his head. "But a 'mystery woman's' always a grand note, if you can find one."

"The supply of mystery in Medbury just won't hold out that far—it's too much to expect. We don't deal much in veiled sirens. This is the first time in history that the city papers have ever been interested in our town, so we haven't all the trimmings at hand." Jerry's cherubic face sobered. "I hate like the devil to come back without anything. I've done my best and seen 'em all."

"Elimination—finding out what isn't there to get—is just as important as getting it," Peter consoled him. "Let's hear about them, anyway, even if they aren't mysterious."

"Of course, I already knew the three girls whose names I mentioned—at least knew them to speak to."

"Of course," Peter grinned. "I really think it would be a hard job to qualify as a mystery woman in this town. If there's anybody you don't know I've yet to find it out."

"But I was born here!" Jerry presented the fact as a complete explanation.

"Some people could get born and die, even in Medbury, without knowing anything—but that sort don't make good newspaper men."

Jerry's face flushed with pleasure at the implied compliment.

" One of the girls—that's Eva Collins—works as a clerk in her father's drug store," he said. " Asbury's kidded her along a bit and taken her out some. But I'm sure it never went beyond mild petting parties when he parked his machine along the road. Eva hasn't got the brains to lie if she wanted to. They were just playing about—nothing serious on either side. She thought Asbury was married to Mrs. Cole, and after ' Mrs. Asbury,' as she called her, appeared on the scene one day when Asbury was flirting with her across the soda fountain counter, she dropped him. She didn't want to get mixed up in any trouble, and she got a very definite idea that trouble was what Mrs. Cole was out for."

" Asbury's philanderings seem to have been conducted under difficulties," Peter commented.

" You don't know the half of it!" Jerry agreed. The second girl is a waitress in the restaurant where Asbury took his lunches. She's a romantic young thing and thought he was going to get a divorce and marry her. I don't believe he ever told her so. He merely couldn't resist using the appeal he seems to have for women—they think he's ' masterful,' at least, that was Mary's word for it, and ' thrilling.' Anyway, Mary's father threatened to get after Asbury with a shotgun if he didn't let his daughter alone. Mary cried and thought her father was a tyrannical parent, but Asbury accepted the ultimatum without a struggle. There were plenty more fish in the pond for him—and he had quite enough heavy romance to last him for the rest of his life."

" And the third?" Peter prompted.

" Well, the third is the only one who wouldn't talk."

" Aha! The plot thickens!"

" Not so thick, at that. I don't blame her. She's trying to get a divorce from her husband, and she can't afford to get her name mixed up in anything sensational. He doesn't want the divorce, and he'd fight it with half a chance. They didn't get along, and she walked out on him and got a job as Asbury's bookkeeper. Just how

far things have gone between them I don't know, and she won't tell. But it's her own private mix-up, not Asbury's that makes her keep her mouth shut. Mrs. Cole was jealous of her—but then, she was jealous of everybody. She made a scene on the street one day when she found Winnie Newell driving Asbury's car. Winnie said Asbury had merely lent her the car as a courtesy, to do some shopping. That may be true."

"Evidently you're not so sure of the fair Winnie." Peter's eyebrow was cocked at its most inquisitorial angle.

"I don't like to gossip." Jerry squirmed uncomfortably.

"Gossip is precisely what you're here for," Peter insisted.

"Well, Winnie has a rather gay reputation. She's worked a good deal of overtime for Asbury, coming back to his office in the evenings, and then he'd take her home afterward. There's nothing criminal in that, of course. But she's trying to get her divorce on mental cruelty, with alimony attachments, and she's got to watch her step for fear her husband will start a counter suit and accuse her of running around with other men. In that case, the fair Winifred might find her chances of alimony dissolving into thin air. With so much at stake, you can't blame her for wanting to keep out of the Asbury-Cole mess."

Peter yawned mightily and stretched his long arms the full width of the bed.

"The complications of life in a small town are positively dizzying," he said, and pulled himself lazily to his feet. "That being true, I think it's about time we paid a friendly little call on the chief of police. It's our stern duty to dig up something to keep this story alive till the inquest. Maybe he'll give us a titbit to help it along."

"Not if he knows it, he won't!"

"Oh, well, maybe he won't know it," Peter remarked cheerfully. "Come along. I need a walk, anyway."

" I don't think he'll like it very well. He's rather annoyed."

" Oh, yes?" Peter drawled. The annoyance of the chief of police left his cheerfulness undiminished.

" You see, he's had to put Asbury in jail."

" The deuce he has! You hand me a lead like that at the tail end of a lot of aimless meandering about a waitress and a soda fountain clerk! Good heavens, Jerry, don't you know a new lead when you see one?"

Jerry blushed so deeply that his freckles were completely submerged, but his eyes met Peter's without flinching.

" You told me to report on the girls," he said. " I'm sorry."

" Well, you needn't look at me as if I was a firing squad. You don't know much, for a fact, but that's no sign you won't learn." Under its mock indignation, Peter's tone was jubilant. " What did he put him in jail for?"

" Because of that interview of yours in yesterday's *Herald*. He couldn't do anything else. With Asbury's admission that his first story was faked and that he had been at the ranch that night, there was nothing else to do. Harris had to hold him as a witness for the inquest, or the whole town would have been up in arms. The sheriff's mad as a hatter. He'd have let Asbury go, because he really believes in his innocence, and thinks Harris is making a martyr of Asbury to avoid criticism. But Harris isn't taking any chances."

Peter had already seized his battered felt hat and was halfway to the door.

" Let's see what Harris has to say about this reluctant arrest," he said, hooking his arm into Jerry's.

But Jerry hung back.

" I—I don't believe he'll want to say anything," he said shyly. " I don't believes he likes you very well."

" I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't," Peter chuckled. " But if he doesn't talk, and talk real politely, he's more stupid than I give him credit for.

You can wait here if you'd rather." Peter glanced keenly at Jerry's troubled face.

But the two little stubborn lines were plainly visible at the corners of Jerry's mouth.

"Sure I'll come," he said. "It's just—I didn't want to seem to be asking a favour of a man I've never liked."

"The favour of this interview is going to be all ours," Peter assured him. "Come along."

The endlessly repeated cadence of Peter's sorrowful minor whistle was his sole contribution to social intercourse as they walked along the sun-drenched street to the town hall. But the woebegone tune was broken off short by a sudden pressure of Jerry's hand on his arm.

"There she is now—just coming out," he whispered. "There—with the tan hat. She's turning the corner now. Harris sent for her, or else she's been to see him of her own accord, sure as fate."

Peter turned to gaze upon the disappearing tan hat.

"I'm all ready to get excited," he replied, "but it would be easier if I had some idea who the vanishing lady is."

"It's Winifred Newell!"

"Whoopee!" Peter carolled. "I knew you'd turn out useful. That's an awfully nice note—particularly as we have it tucked away under our hats before friend Harris knows that we know it."

## CHAPTER XVII

"PLEASED to meet you, Mr. Piper. Hello, Dean. And what can I do for you?" The chief of police rose from his chair and extended his hand cordially, but there was nothing affable in the expression of his cold, wary eyes. His political rise had been rapid, and he owed it in part to a policy of treating even his enemies as if he considered them his friends. The practice had given him

the reputation of being a " good fellow," and by throwing others off their guard he could the more easily maintain an unhampered watchfulness for his own advantage.

Jerry evaded the outstretched hand by reaching for a chair, but Peter accepted it with a quizzical smile. Under that smile Harris's glance became more wary than ever. Peter's handclasp had said as plainly as words: " Oh, well, if that's the game it amuses you to play I'll play it."

" I've been sent down from the *Herald* to investigate the Cole case," Peter began directly.

Harris lifted a clipping from among the papers on his desk and studied it for a moment.

" I notice that you've undertaken to interview witnesses prior to the inquest." The muscles of his face were still drawn into the semblance of a smile, but his voice was brittle.

" Sure, I'm interviewing everybody I can lay hands on—even you, Chief," Peter responded amiably.

I've no doubt your sole motive is to further the ends of justice——"

" Sure," Peter repeated, " that's all that newspapers exist for!"

Despite his effort to remain unmoved, annoyance wiped out the stiff remnants of Harris's smile. His eyes took on the gray glint of ice. Peter's unabashed cynicism, interrupting his periods, placed him at a disadvantage—and he did not choose to be placed at a disadvantage.

" Well," he said sternly, " your methods thus far have been more like interfering with the police. And so far as I know, it's the police, not the newspapers, who are investigating this case."

" Oh, investigation's always an open field for whoever can get away with it," Peter announced with wild disregard of grammar. " But of course, the *Herald* has no desire to embarrass you."

" You're not embarrassing me—don't think it."

Harris tapped the clipping nervously on the desk. " But naturally, when an outsider, ignorant of local conditions, comes down here and tries to stir up a lot of dust for the sake of making a newspaper sensation, it isn't helping the authorities. The police force, if I may say so, are quite competent to handle their own affairs in this town."

" I'm getting less ignorant of local conditions every day." Peter's voice was as near a purr as a human voice can be. He gazed at Harris with all the bright innocence of a cat who has just swallowed the canary. " And we can't create sensations out of the void, worse luck. We have to be content with those the Lord provides—and those we can dig up."

You've done your best to manufacture one on the suicide of Mrs. Cole. Your newspaper is endeavouring to confuse a perfectly clear issue." Harris's manner was nettled, but he forced his voice back to its former ingratiating tone. " I suggest that it would be better all round if we came to an understanding and worked together."

" Fine!" Peter agreed.

" I will keep you informed of any further developments which you are welcome to report to your paper." Harris's voice dropped on a note of finality. He reached out his hand again to Peter, with a beaming smile. The smile, Peter noted, expressed relief as well as cordiality.

Peter rose in obedience to the gesture, but he made no move to leave the room.

" As, for instance, this arrest of Asbury, which I understand you've just made," he suggested blandly. " If you saw your way to making a statement about that it might give us something besides potential sensations to write about."

A smothered snort came from the chair in the corner, where Jerry sat, a delighted auditor. Jerry pulled out a handkerchief and delivered an extremely artificial sneeze to cover his explosion of glee. If Harris had supposed that Peter would meekly wait for official informa-

tion of " further developments " his error had been pointed out with dexterity and speed.

Harris's eyes glazed again into hard, gray ice.

" You may quote me as saying," he spoke with cold deliberation, " that Asbury has been watched by the authorities from the beginning. His arrest was delayed only until they had had time to check up on his statement. The police, who have given Mrs. Cole's death a thorough and expert investigation, are convinced that she took her own life, and that Asbury's original denial of his visit to the ranch was due to a hasty and unnecessary fear of a misconstruction of his movements on the night in question. When he had had time to reconsider Asbury talked freely to the police." Harris's pause gave pointed emphasis to the last words.

" To the police—I get that." Peter glanced up from the paper on which he was rapidly taking notes. " That's all right—we're not out to steal your thunder."

Harris jerked his head back in a gesture of acute annoyance. It was all right for this upstart reporter to see what he meant; but why did he insist on saying so? With difficulty, he recovered his air of frank cooperation.

" Understand, there is no question of Asbury being responsible for Mrs. Cole's death. The evidence shows that to be impossible. We are merely holding him until the inquest, as a formality, and to spare him the annoyance of—er—persecution by inquisitive outsiders."

" One of whom I am which," Peter admitted with impudent candour. " Well, no bones are broken. If he can prove an alibi he's just as well off as if he hadn't told the truth, you know."

" The evidence clearly points to suicide. However, Asbury is prepared to make his movements perfectly plain, for his own protection. There is a portion of the public who would rather indulge suspicion than admit facts, any day."

" And that's all the new developments we can expect until the inquest?"

" If anything else comes up I'll be glad to let you know. Understand, Mr. Piper, we are not trying to keep any legitimate news away from the papers. If you had asked me about Asbury's second statement I'd have been glad to give it to you."

" I'm sure you would!" Yet Peter was very certain that Harris had received his first inkling of that statement when he had read it in the *Herald* and had been by no means pleased with what he read. " Now, just where does Mrs. Winifred Newell come into the picture?"

Harris looked down at the papers on his desk and said nothing for a long minute.

" Portrait of a man who yearns to say ' Go to hell ' and knows he'd better not," Peter murmured under his breath to Jerry.

The chief of police turned stiffly. The smile on his face had the hard smoothness of cake-icing about to crack.

" I'd like to ask you as a personal favour not to try to interview any more witnesses until the inquest," he said. " I'm playing fair with you, and I'm sure you will do the same."

Peter's eyebrow tilted sharply. So far, Harris had balked every step of the way, yet he was trying to put Peter under an imaginary sense of obligation. But Peter's comment was limited to that lift of an eyebrow.

" Then Mrs. Newell is to testify—for Asbury, I take it?"

" Mrs. Newell is going to testify. And I have advised her not to talk to any one "—Harris lingered emphatically on the word—" until she gives her testimony before the coroner's jury."

" Well, it won't be long now," Peter agreed amiably. " So long, Chief. See you later."

" The inquest is going to be a farce," Jerry groaned as they made their way out. " They'll turn Asbury

loose and get a verdict of suicide, and that will be the end of it."

"Harris will see to it that the evidence is just about what he wants it to be. But he's not so secure in his own mind. If he were he wouldn't have been afraid of us and anything we might dig up. However, there's nothing except an earthquake more unpredictable than an inquest. They're the grand little surprise packets. And we've always got to remember that, even if Harris is so crooked he could hide behind a pretzel, he may have the facts on his side. That's hard to take, but it may be so."

"I'd give a quarter to know what Winnie Newell is going to say," Jerry said mournfully.

"So would I—but that's blocked. And we'll find out to-morrow, anyway."

However, Peter was not whistling as they walked to the hotel.

In the lobby a small, dusty figure rose out of the gloom and precipitated itself upon Peter, catching at the lapels of his coat with both hands.

"I never thought much of Bossy as a means of locomotion till I compared her with walking three and a half miles in the hottest part of the afternoon," Barbara exclaimed. "I telephoned and telephoned and couldn't raise you. So I came in on foot and thought at least I'd have a bath, and the clerk wouldn't let me have the key to your room and looked at me as if I had designs on you. Aren't you flattered to have it supposed that any one would want to pretend to be your wife, Peter?"

"Has anything happened?" Jerry asked anxiously.

"A blister on my right rear heel has happened," Barbara assured him grimly.

"Allison——?"

"Allison is all right. Please don't stop to worry about her for a minute, because I'm really bursting with something important. Peter, please do show that room clerk our marriage licence or birth certificate or some-

thing, so that we can go up to your room and let me tell it. It's something you'll have to look into."

Heat and dust forgotten, Barbara perched herself on the foot of Peter's bed, swinging her heels in a resounding tattoo, and faced her waiting audience.

"Jerry," she said solicitously, "you're sure you don't care who did this thing so long as you find out the truth?"

"I don't think anything could be as bad as not finding out and having it hang over her always," Jerry answered, a new solemnity in his voice.

"Then——" Barbara took a deep breath and went on—"there were three people who hated Mrs. Cole—hated her enough to say that she deserved to die. They were her daughter, and her son-in-law—and her husband. All three of them have been at the ranch recently. There were the most horrible quarrels. Peter, I didn't know people *could* quarrel like that! And Allison knows that one of them—some one—was at the ranch house just before she came in from the orchard and found her mother's body. She thought if she waited there she might find out which one it was."

"Good Lord!" Peter breathed. "The gray paint on the fence post—and the fourth tyre!"

## CHAPTER XVIII

PETER paused at the hotel desk to ask the way to the morgue.

"Harman's Undertaking Parlours? Right down this street and turn to your left where the Free Market is—you can't miss it. You going to Mrs. Asbury's inquest?" the clerk asked with envious curiosity, as if it had been an exclusive reception to which he wished he had been invited.

"Yes." Peter felt that if one other inhabitant of Medbury gave him directions ending with, "You can't

miss it," the number of local homicides would be forthwith augumented by one.

"Well, you better get there early," the clerk advised. "There'll be a big crowd. Everybody in town's going that can get off. I tried to swap shifts with the night man, but he wouldn't do it. He wouldn't even match dimes for it! But some people just won't be sports." The clerk sighed heavily, expressing his sense of injury at the night man's lack of sportsmanship.

"I think I can get in," Peter said modestly. "If I do I'll bring you all the dope."

"Thanks. Gee, them witnesses are the lucky ones! I wish I could have been a witness myself, but when I thought things over I just didn't know one thing about it. Well, good luck to you!"

When Peter reached the entrance of the undertaking parlours he admitted that the clerk's advice had been wise. The double doors were still locked, but the crowd already packed the wide porch and dribbled along the sidewalk in both directions. Peter wondered how it could possibly happen that so many people had nothing to do at ten o'clock on a week-day morning. A little girl sat on the edge of the porch, dangling her feet and hugging a teddy bear.

"There was nobody to leave her with, so I had to bring her," her mother explained to a neighbour. "I'll keep her on my lap, so she won't take up room. Do you suppose they'll let us see the body?"

"No. Nobody but the jury gets to see it," a man informed her in disgruntled tones.

The big doors swung outward, slowly thrusting against the crowd as if it were a thick, semi-fluid mass. Peter caught sight of Barbara, waving her hand high in the air to attract his attention. He forced his way against the stream of bobbing heads and seized her by the arm. He bent down until his lips almost touched her ear.

"Where's Allison?" he whispered.

"Jerry's bringing her. I think"—Barbara's face

tilted upward with its elfin smile—" that Jerry rather liked the job of taking charge of her, and I didn't want to spoil it. She insisted on coming. I think she has an idea that something may be brought out that we haven't known."

" Not a chance," Peter said sardonically. " This show is all arranged beforehand to proceed according to schedule."

" I wish she hadn't come. And yet, she felt she ought to see it through, the stares, the curiosity, the going over it all—everything. She thought she's be funking it if she didn't. And in a way she's right. I was rather proud of her for saying that she wanted to face it. It took all the courage she has—because her sister and brother-in-law came in by automobile this morning."

" The deuce they did!" Peter's voice rose in his excitement; but as he caught eager glances turning in his direction from the crowd closely packed around them, he dropped it again to an almost inaudible murmur. " Has she seen them?"

" No. They telephoned out to the ranch from Medbury. But you see—they make two who have come back. And she was waiting for some one to come back. It was Mr. Lawrence on the telephone, and he just said they had brought some one with them to represent the Cole interests. When she turned from the 'phone she was white as death. I think she is afraid—terribly afraid that they will get up and say something—and of what it might be that they would have to say. And yet it would be worse not to be there, not to know what was happening."

" It does seem sort of funny that her own sister didn't go to her at once." Peter gazed into space with a puzzled frown.

" No funnier than everything else about it." Nervous tension made Barbara speak almost crossly. " Imagine that poor child growing up with the idea that hers was a normal family. If they were bound together at all it was more by hate and jealousy than by ordinary family

affection. Allison is seven years younger than Mrs. Lawrence, so there was never much intimacy between them. There's a tremendous gulf between the grown-up young woman and the little girl that Allison was when her mother took her away."

"Well, if she'd been a decent sort it strikes me that she'd have tried to do something to get the child out of it," Peter argued.

"They're all turned in on themselves—wrapped up in their own desires. What they want justifies anything they may do to get it; and if they can't get it the whole universe is wrong because it's intractable. Nobody ever seems to have considered Allison's side of it. She was just there to be buffeted. So far as I can make out, Elsie jumped at the chance to marry Lawrence and get away from the dullness of life with her morose, preoccupied father. She craved excitement, and the only way she could get it was to lead Lawrence a hectic dance, going just as far as she dared.

"I'm not sure that she didn't pay that visit to the ranch more for a thrill than with the idea of being of help. Certainly her tactics were not helpful. Then when the situation of her own making got too much for her, she turned on her mother. If Mrs. Cole spoiled Elsie's life for her, she would never forgive her—never. To spoil things for Elsie would be Elsie's idea of the unpardonable sin. Allison didn't tell it to me like that, but it sticks out as plain as the nose on your face from what she did tell me."

"What a crew!" Peter's disgust was mingled with wondering contemplation.

"Yes," Barbara nodded, "and they had money, education, advantages—everything. Only they just couldn't think that anything was important to them except their own feelings. And yet, Allison isn't like that."

"I should hope not!" Peter said with great positiveness.

"Well, she might have been. But somehow it

worked just the other way. It wasn't just that she hated what she saw and was afraid. She hated the only kind of love she knew, and it was because she thought Jerry belonged to another and better world that she tried to make him go away. She didn't rush to him for escape, badly as she needed escape. She didn't think of herself at all; she was thinking of him. She wanted him to remain unsmirched in that better world, where she placed him. There's courage in that, Peter. Courage, and something that looks beyond self. And she can't even see that her wish to keep Jerry clear shows how uncontaminated she is."

"I've somehow a notion that Jerry is growing up very rapidly," Peter observed. "He's thinking of Allison, wanting to help her, and she's thinking only of him, hating the thing she's learned to think of as love. Presently they'll wake up to the fact that they're thinking of each other and might as well pool their interests."

"I wish they would," Barbara sighed.

The crowd had poured slowly, steadily into the dark interior of the undertaking parlours in a viscous, flowing mass. The porch still overflowed with those who had found no room inside, coagulating at the windows and doors, clotted on the steps. Barbara and Peter had been left behind, standing on the sidewalk.

"Come on," Peter said, seizing her firmly by the elbow. "They'll begin in a minute."

"I'm not sure that I want to go in," Barbara hesitated. "It seems so horrible, somehow. All of them out to see the show—not caring, really."

"But of course! Their nearest touch with tragedy is when the meat doesn't come in time for dinner. Jealousy—love—hate—death—mystery. They wouldn't like having those things crash in on them. And yet it represents an intensity in existence which they have missed. They have the chance to brush skirts with drama, even if it's only an inquest in a country town. It may be futile and second rate of them, but it's very human, after all. You needn't high-hat them for it.

Besides," Peter added practically, " I'll have to dash out to the telephone if anything breaks. Jerry won't be any good. If Allison happened to faint he'd forget that there was such a thing as a deadline in existence. You come along with me and keep your eyes open."

With his elbow firmly linked through Barbara's arm, Peter fought his way through the solid mass in front of the door. Blinking his eyes in the dimness of the interior, he prodded resolutely up the aisle to the front of the large room. The windows gave little light; they were blocked by the dark masses of figures standing against the wall. There were men in shirt sleeves; a group of young women in eye shades, tennis rackets balanced across their knees; elderly women in picture hats, waving palm-leaf fans. He caught a fleeting glimpse of the child with the teddy bear, perched on her mother's knees. The crowd was very quiet. The long benches ranged crosswise, with an aisle between, gave the room a resemblance to a church, and the crowd responded with manners appropriate to the opening of a Sunday service.

Peter forced his way forward, past the two front rows, where the coroner's jury sat, solemnly important in the consciousness of reserved seats. At last he reached the cleared space beyond the benches. The coroner, the chief of police, a clerk, and a huge, bald-headed figure, slightly withdrawn, were gathered around a card table. At another card table clustered the press representatives. They had accepted in their stories the suicide conclusion advanced by the authorities, but the word had gone around that the *Herald* was after something. Probably the inquest would show that the *Herald* was out on a wild-goose chase, but it would bear watching.

" The jury will step this way and view the body of the deceased."

The coroner mouthed his words as if he were endeavouring to dispose of a bite too large for him.

The jurors, self-conscious and uncertain, looked questioningly at one another until one, bolder than the

rest, rose from the bench. Then, with the solemnity of sheep, they advanced in single file across the open space and disappeared through a door behind the press table.

"Come on!" Peter tightened his pressure on Barbara's arm and led her past the front row of benches. He pulled two small folding chairs nearer to the press table and thrust Barbara into one of them, nodding briefly to the clustering reporters.

Barbara glanced about her. The crowd was a massed blackness to the block of blue sky visible through the wide-open doors at the opposite end of the room. Peter, who had been busily writing, obligingly thrust a list of names and initials across the table to the other correspondents. Barbara's mouth curved upward in a whimsical smile at the bizarre illusion that the multitude was awaiting for them to open a game of bridge.

The jury shuffled back through the little door at the rear. The coroner glanced over his shoulder at the chief of police, as if seeking permission to open proceedings. The fat, bald-headed man leaned over, trying to catch Peter's eye. But at that moment the coroner, having waited until the second row of jurors surmounted the difficulties of fitting their knees into the narrow space between the benches, began to speak, and the rustling of fans became suddenly loud as all whispering ceased.

The inquest on the death of Mrs. Natalie Cole had begun.

## CHAPTER XIX

Miss Edythe Grainge tripped across the carpeted space in front of the benches with the quick mincing gait of one who is conscious of her feet. She surveyed the massed faces before her with a nervous twitching of the lips—a smile, half-timid, half-triumphant. She was badly smitten with stage fright, and her hand, incased

in an obviously new glove, shook as she raised it to take the oath. Her hat was new also, and her mother had made her a new printed silk dress for the occasion.

As she had surveyed herself in the long mirror tilted against the wall of the living-room for the convenience of her mother's customers, she had felt oddly detached, as if she were looking at a character in a story. She was no longer Edie Grainge, the switchboard operator, but Edythe, the Edythe of her fantasies. She had known all along, of course, that no black limousine would ever stop at the curb and abduct her when she walked home along the Medbury streets after her night shift. But this, which she had never thought of inventing, had really happened. She was to be a witness at the inquest —an inquest, moreover, that involved violence and millionaires.

The death at the ranch house had been Medbury's sole topic of conversation for days. It had revealed Mrs. Asbury not, as Edie's mother had often defined her, as " a silly, hysterical woman bent on making trouble," but as a heroine, sinning, mysterious, and romantic. She had not been married to Mr. Asbury, after all! It was undignified, Edie had granted while she pulled basting threads for her mother, to chase after an errant lover, making scenes on the street. But since she had " given all for love," even those scenes became glamorous. Edie's eyes shone into the reflected eyes in the mirror. Almost she envied Mrs. Asbury—not for getting killed, of course, but for loving " not wisely but too well."

And to her ears, to hers alone, had come the message —those last words, vibrant with tragedy. She, Edie Grainge at the switchboard, had become a part of it. It was as if she had stepped straight into a book. No, a thousand times better, for this had really happened to her. The book had stepped out into life, life in Medbury. Edie felt a childish desire to pinch herself as she turned from the mirror. It was too bad that she could not afford a new coat for the inquest; but never

mind, she could leave her coat on the back of her seat, and the new dress looked really very nice.

Her mind seemed to be divided into two parts as she stood before the little table and began to speak. One part of it stood off and listened to her own voice—a voice that shook with stage fright, as if she were a child facing an examination at school and fearful that she would forget everything in nervous confusion. But the other part of her mind flowed like a swift, clear current, realising that here at last was her hour of adventure, a recompense for all the colourless years in which she had solaced herself with empty daydreams.

A juror in the second row cupped his hand around his ear.

"Tell her to speak up a bit louder, Fred," he addressed the sheriff familiarly.

The two parts of Edie's mind flowed together, bearing her along on a single mighty stream. A voice rose out of that stream, loud, clear, and resonant. The pattern of the crowd shifted. They were all leaning forward, those in the rear half rising from their seats to peer over the shoulders of those in front. But Edie no longer saw them.

"She said, 'My God, this is the end! My lover—my lover is killing me!'" Edie's gloved hands were clasped in a convulsive gesture against her breast. Her shining eyes were fixed on indeterminate space. This was the way it should have been. And at that moment, carried away by that shining current, this was the way Edie really believed it had been.

The chief of police jerked forward as if he had been stung and plucked at the coroner's sleeve. The fat man scraped his chair back and lumbered with unexpected celerity to his feet. The other reporters at the press table glanced exultantly at Peter, while their pencils scurried across sheets of copy paper. Peter did not return the look, even when it was reinforced by a nudge on the ankle from the shoe of his nearest neighbour. His pencil dropped from his fingers and rolled a little way across

the table. His eyes were fastened on Miss Edythe Grainge, who stood with parted lips, the printed silk of her new blouse rising and falling with her quick breaths, under her clasped gloved hands.

But Edie saw and heard none of these things. What she heard, scattering that smooth, splendid, shining current on which she was borne, was an insistent, commanding rat-rat-rat. Peter had recaptured his pencil and was rapping it loudly against the corner of the table. The sound drew her eyes irresistibly, and she became aware of Peter looking at her. It was not a shocked look, nor astonished nor even reproachful. It was a look compounded of quizzical humour and urgent warning. As Edie stared at him, Peter's lips soundlessly but very distinctly formed the two words, "Look out!"

Edie felt as if she had been floating inside a bubble, and the bubble had burst, casting her abruptly on something sharp and hard and very actual. She saw the jurors leaning forward, one of them with his hand still cupped around his ear. Her hands dropped at her sides. It wasn't a story. It was a real woman who lay there dead in the next room—a woman who had depended on Edie to take her last message. She had sent those words to Edie. No matter what they meant—even if they weren't the words they should have been, they were *her* words. Maybe she'd intended to say it differently—but she hadn't.

Edie was perfectly certain that Mrs. Asbury had meant to say that her lover was killing her, and that he had done it. But she hadn't said it. It was not the seriousness of the implication, nor the importance of her oath, that pulled Edie back to full consciousness. It was a sudden rush of pity for the woman who was dead, and who had a right to her message just as she had given it. She was not even horrified with the realisation that she had not told the truth—it had seemed the truth as she uttered it, or something even better, an improvement on the incoherence of fact.

"No," she heard herself saying quite calmly.

" We've talked so much about this thing since it happened that I wasn't quoting quite literally. I didn't get it right just now. But I copied out exactly what she said, there in the telephone exchange, immediately afterward. I have it here in my bag. May I read it?"

The fat man sank back in his chair, which squeaked alarmingly under his weight.

" Are we to understand that you are about to read an exact transcript of the message from notes made at the time?"

Edie fumbled in her bag and brought out a torn scrap of paper.

" Yes," she said, " this is it."

Peter realised that he must have been holding his breath for a long time. A gusty and audible sigh of relief broke from him as he heard again the reiterated words:

" ' Operator,' very loud. Then there was a pause, and then, ' He's killing me. I'm dying, operator.' Then, loud again, ' Operator! Operator!' That was all I heard, except somebody breathing. I told the supervisor that something serious had happened at the Asbury place, and gave her my head piece. There is a clock on the wall. I looked at it, and saw that it was just seventeen minutes to ten. I wrote down the time and the exact words, as I heard them, before I called the sheriff's office."

Peter stared at the paper before him. It didn't fit in, and yet it had to fit in, somehow. He must watch for little, irrelevant things. Some little thing would give meaning to all the scattered details. They weren't scattered, really. They couldn't be, because they were facts, and the facts had to join together, though he couldn't see how. And their meaning was at the mercy of other people's accuracy. If once you began tampering with those facts ever so slightly the whole meaning, whatever it was, would be lost, thrown hopelessly out of gear. Peter breathed a sigh of thankfulness that Edie Grainge had written down those words. They might so

easily have been lost, distorted so reasonably by her imagination, touching up—innocently and disastrously —the unsatisfactory truth.

The fat man drew out a large white handkerchief and mopped an expanse of polished brow. Edie was tripping back to her seat. The interlude was filled with a swishing sound, the sibilance of many whispers. The fat man leaned over sidewise in his squeaking chair and touched Peter's arm. Peter turned and recognised a distinguished member of the city bar.

" Why, hello, Whittlesey," he said, extending his hand. " I haven't seen you since the Northbury trial. What are you doing here?"

" I'm Asbury's attorney."

Peter's lips shaped into a soundless whistle. Asbury must indeed have financial backing if he could afford to hire Whittlesey.

" I saw how you pulled that girl out, Piper," Whittlesey said, leaning forward with an arm on the back of Peter's chair. " I don't know just what line you're taking on this——"

" It's hard to believe, but I'm not taking any line. I'm a poor lost sheep without any theory to tinkle ahead and lead my nose. I want to find out what really happened—and I haven't the ghost of an idea. But I couldn't bear to have things get any worse mixed up than they are."

" Well, you did a good job there. If she got it once fixed in her head that the woman named Asbury she'd have believed it and made the jury believe it, and we'd have had the dickens of a time getting out of it. Even if I could have shaken her on cross-examination, the jury would have taken their choice and probably would have believed the best story on general principles. Mind you, I'm convinced that the woman did commit suicide."

" I'm hanged if I know, Peter growled unhappily.

Whittlesey withdrew his arm from Peter's chair and reached into his side pocket.

" Well, here's something that goes a long way to

prove it," he said. " You did us a good turn a minute ago, so I might as well give the *Herald* the break on it."

Peter took the folded paper from Whittlesey's hand just as the general whispering lapsed like a wind that has dropped.

" F. M. Rondel!"

The sheriff had risen and stood by the coroner's table, his right hand lifted.

## CHAPTER XX

Peter half unfolded the sheet of letterhead paper which Whittlesey had passed to him, then regretfully slipped it into his pocket. Although he felt sure what the sheriff would say, he dared not risk missing one of those chance details whose significance might easily be lost and which yet might be the guiding thread to the pattern of events. The sheriff beamed an individual greeting to each of the jurors, and the listening faces relaxed in serene confidence.

" He may believe whatever he's told, and yet he'll tell the truth as he sees it," Peter meditated. " He'd never dream of working against Harris. And yet I'm not sure that simple honesty isn't the most dangerous thing in the world to the man who is too clever, because he'll take it for granted that every one else is as honest as he is. He believes in Asbury, and he believes in Harris—and it doesn't occur to him that the truth could hurt either of them. Well, maybe it can't."

" I got the telephone call from Miss Grainge that something was wrong at the Asbury place a little before ten o'clock," Rondel was saying. " I'd already gone to bed, but I got up and dressed and 'phoned the coroner and the Chief that I'd come around for them and we'd all go out together. I understood from Edie—from Miss Grainge," he amended, hastily recovering the formality due the occasion, " that it was a case of murder, so I thought we better take the coroner along."

Peter's eyes were lazily intent on the paper before

him, where he was engaged in drawing five-pointed stars inclosed in pentagons. Many a court bailiff had picked up crumpled sheets covered with those diagrams whose lines and angles formed a pattern elaborate in proportion to the extended testimony of witnesses. When Peter drew stars, his attention apparently withdrawn from the scene before him, the reporters who shared the press table had learned to wonder what he was watching for.

"We found the lights on, and the front door open, but the screen latched. We knocked and didn't get any answer, so we went around to the back. We found Mrs. Asbury lying in a pool of blood on the kitchen floor, between the table and the stove. She was lying flat on her back, her hands above her head, and her feet crossed."

"Darn those crossed feet!" Peter jabbed his pencil point viciously into the corner of his drawing.

"There was a great pool of blood spattered about, all over the walls and floor and doorway—even the ceiling," the sheriff went on, his florid face paling at the memory of that scene of carnage. "The telephone was in the centre of the stand, with the receiver hanging down."

Peter's shoulders quivered in an almost imperceptible shrug.

"That settles the telephone," he decided. "It really was in the middle of the table when they got there, and nobody moved it. She put in that telephone call and then set the telephone back precisely in its place. The old boy's telling the truth—and there's another neat little idea gone wrong."

By the depression which settled down upon him, Peter realised how much he had hoped that the chief of police, the coroner, or even the sheriff himself might have have put that telephone so tidily in the exact centre of the table. He wrenched his attention back, to find that Rondel was engaged in describing the gun.

"We found it on the floor on the opposite side of the kitchen table, five or six feet from the body and parallel to it. There was a dent in the door where it had rebounded and fallen over. There was one exploded shell in the magazine and three remaining."

"Say, Fred, do you know just how far the gun would recoil if nobody was holding it?" a juror in the front row called out. He had the pompous air of one who took his importance seriously and was eager to demonstrate it by asking questions.

"Well, now, Mr. Crandall," Rondel answered indulgently, "I didn't fire this particular gun, but I know guns in general, and it could do it easy if it was laid on the table the way we think it was."

"Can we see it?" the juror persisted.

"Bring the gun up front, Jake," the coroner mumbled over his shoulder, and the gun was passed forward to the sheriff.

The crowd shifted position, craning forward to see the weapon, which was suddenly not an ordinary gun, but individual, sinister.

"Before leaving the house I dusted it for fingerprints, but there weren't any," the sheriff said, holding the rifle in the crook of his arm. "The next day when I examined it under the microscope I found that there was paint on it, and the little crisscross scratch on the door corresponded exactly to the scrap of paint on the barrel. There was one other thing on it—three wisps of hair were caught in the sight at the end, here."

The point of Peter's pencil broke with a snap. Hair! Three strands of hair. This was what he had been waiting for. This was one of the things that had to be fitted in. Whose hair? Mrs. Cole's, as the gun was held against her skull? Asbury's, caught in the struggle? He had a swift vision of the woman and the man weaving back and forth, clutching at the gun which was quiescent in their clinging, sweating hands—quiescent until with the pressure of a finger the bullet awoke and tore its way to death. What

did those three hairs prove? What did they mean?

In a daze he heard the sheriff's voice rumble on, describing the finding of the note pinned to Mrs. Cole's pillow, reconstructing the scene in which the woman, having predicted her own death in that note, had stood alone in the brightly lighted kitchen, telephoned the message which would carry her vengeance beyond the silence of death, had placed the gun on the table, brought the stick from the woodbox to extend her reach, and then, sitting cross-legged on the floor, had deliberately stretched out her arm to death. Had a cold agony guided those last movements? Had she rushed across the room in frenzy, and flung her arm forward, clutching the stick, in a blind fury of despair?

"It's so plausible—it could have happened like that——"

Barbara's warning touch on his arm made him realise that his lips were moving. It fitted in. No finger prints—no finger prints. The sheriff had ceased speaking. There was a confused sound of many people rising to their feet, a sound like beating wings. The reporters caught up their papers from the press table and clustered in a knot at the side of the room, waiting for the crowd to thin out before going to lunch. The inquest had adjourned for the noon recess, but Peter did not know it.

No finger prints. But if Mrs. Cole had placed that gun on the table her finger prints would be on it, just as they were on the telephone! Unless—unless with the same diabolical coolness which had led her to replace the telephone after plotting to send an innocent man to the gallows, she had thought of the finger prints and had wiped them off after adjusting the gun. But if she had been cool enough, devilish enough to do that, surely she would have named Asbury instead of wording her message in a way that threw on him only a vague suspicion.

It flashed upon Peter's mind wildly that the hair

was Asbury's, and that she had herself threaded it across the gun sights, as part of her plot—her hands busied during her last moments in a task of vindictive hate. Would anyone who was about to die wipe off the gun, arranging every item with gloating ingenuity? Would not hate itself, jealousy, vengeance seem trivial, not worth scheming for, in the approach to the vast clarity or the vast darkness of eternity?

Peter pressed his fingers against his throbbing temples. Then he dropped his hands to the table and methodically scanned his notes. Under the scribbled line recording the sheriff's account of the hairs caught in the gun sights he drew a heavy double line. He turned to Barbara with a heavy sigh.

"We might as well go. I'll telephone this stuff in to the office before lunch," he said drearily. Peter baffled was indeed an object of pathos.

"What was in that letter that fat man handed you?" Barbara scurried about in her mind for a remark that would rouse Peter from his dismal apathy.

"By jiminy, I forgot all about it!"

In the deserted room, where only a few straggling loiterers still lingered by the open doors, Peter took the paper from his pocket and bent his head over the typewritten lines. It was headed with the expensively engraved address of Howard Whittlesey, attorney at law. Peter's face was grimly expressionless as he jotted down its contents.

"Monday, September 9th (day preceding death)," he summarised, "Mrs. C. went to office of J. L. Goodrich, lawyer, and made will leaving ranch to Edward Comstock. Will now in possession of Goodrich. Told him relatives were amply provided for, but wanted to be sure ranch would go to Comstock, 'in token of gratitude to my only real friend.' Disposal of property clearly indicates suicide intent. May be brought out at inquest if necessary to clinch case for suicide."

"Ye gods!" Peter's voice oddly mingled distress with exultation. Here was another and unexpected

addition to his perplexity—but at least his information, telephoned by long distance, would outstrip the opposition papers, which as yet had no wind of it.

"We've got to beat it back to the hotel and send this in," he said. "But in the name of all that's holy, who is Edward Comstock?"

## CHAPTER XXI

Oh, Lord, I promised to carry the news to the hotel clerk! He's ready to pass out from baffled curiosity, and he won't be content with less than a verbatim transcript followed by a cross-examination," Peter groaned. "Darling, why don't you warn me against the perils of a sweet disposition? It's always making me hand out promises that I haven't time to keep." A wry grin expressed his drastic disapproval of his own soft-hearted yielding to unwarranted appeals. But it did not occur to him that he might fail to keep his promise and leave the clerk languishing in vain for his information.

"Peter, you are rather a darling, especially when you hate yourself for being one," Barbara answered. "But while you're sympathising with the hotel clerk you might pass a little sympathy my way. Do you know that you're striding along as if you were practising for a marathon, and that I've had to trot at a fearful rate to keep up?"

"You don't trot," Peter protested. "I won't have you say you trot. I've always liked the way you walk—swift and free and light. But I didn't mean to rush you; only there's such a lot to do in one little noon hour." He checked his pace contritely, but after a dozen steps his stride unconsciously lengthened again, goaded by the rush of his thoughts.

"That's a nice compliment, but it doesn't keep me from getting out of breath," Barbara tilted a flushed face upward and turned to Peter with her mischievous

urchin smile. "I feel like the oysters trailing the carpenter: "After we've brought them out so far, and made them trot so quick.' I seriously suggest that you should have sought a longer-legged lady for your wife. However, I bear no malice. I'll converse vigorously and at length with the clerk while you telephone your stuff."

"Good idea. Barbara, you're a brick. You're a high-powered executive. I'd like you just the same if you didn't have any legs at all, long or short."

Barbara paused to drop a curtsey as they entered the hotel lobby.

"Thanks, but I prefer legs, even short ones. Now you run along."

Peter darted towards a telephone booth. His last glimpse of Barbara was of a small, slight figure balanced on tiptoe as she bent forward with both elbows propped on the counter, while the mail which the clerk had been sorting dangled forgotten from his hand.

In the stifling darkness of the booth Peter wrestled heroically and at length with the long-distance connection.

"Comstock. C for cat—— My grief, didn't you ever hear of a cat? Meow, kitty-kitty! No, not K. Oh, forget it. C for Cute, O for Onion, M for Mary. . . . No, tell Jimmy I don't know who he is. I'm going to find out if I ever get out of this black hole of Calcutta. . . . No, nothing yet, but that's no sign there won't be. I don't know, I tell you. Better be noncommittal for the present. *Non-committal*, I said. Tell Jimmy I'm not going to quit till I do. Plenty of lines out, but I don't know where they're leading. . . . That'll hold 'em for the home edition. If anything breaks before the deadline I'll call back."

Peter emerged at last, wiping a glistening brow, to find that Barbara had succeeded in gratifying the room clerk and was sitting with feet tucked up in a big chair in a corner of the lobby, chatting with Jerry.

"Thank God!" Peter exclaimed devoutly.

Jerry looked up in surprise at his tone of reverent solemnity.

"Oh, he does that," Barbara explained. "Peter was working on a big story when I first knew him, and I thought the only way he had of opening a conversation was with 'Thank God.'"

"I thought you might like me to look you up," Jerry said diffidently. "But I was afraid you might think I was in the way——"

"You bet I wanted you to look me up!" Peter towered wrathfully over him. "Do you know who Edward Comstock is?"

"Why, of course——"

"Don't tell me again that you were born here—I couldn't bear it! Good boy! I just knew you'd sucked eggs with him or something. Who is he?"

"He's a dour old curmudgeon who has the ranch right across the road from the Asbury place. He's one of those innocent city souls who thought it would be idyllic to live in the country and make an income by just listening to the birds and watching things grow. Five years ago he quit his job as bookkeeper and put all his savings, which weren't such a lot, into a down payment on this ranch. He didn't know the first thing about farming, of course. He had to make the ranch pay, or he was sunk. He brooded over it a lot. He couldn't bear the thought of going back to the treadmill for the rest of his life, with nothing to hope for. Always he'd endure it because he had this dream of escape.

"The place was mortgaged up to the hilt. I've heard they were going to foreclose on him. He'd got 'way behind with his payments, and if he couldn't pay up he'd lose even his equity in the place. I felt sorry for him and got kind of interested. It isn't that he talked about it much. But I suppose I knew him about as well as anybody around here."

"You would," Peter murmured.

"He isn't what you'd call a pleasant, easy-going soul," Jerry apologised, "but, you see, he'd concen-

trated all these years on that dream of a ranch. Then he found out that farming isn't as simple as bookeeping. There's too much of the unexpected in it—too many ' acts of God,' like the weather and aphis and codling moth. And it wasn't only the prospect of going back to his ledgers that made him stand in his orchard and stare at the trees without seeing them. He left his job five years ago, and he's sixty years old if he's a day. He couldn't get another job by just asking for it. He's been getting thinner and more silent and his eyes have sunk back in his head. I—felt sorry for him." Jerry's voice trembled as imagination projected him into the dismal recesses of Comstock's despair.

" Friend of Mrs. Cole's?" Peter jerked him back to the present.

" Oh, yes; she told him her troubles. She told them to anyone who would listen. I think it took his mind off his own problem to know someone who imagined her affairs were in a worse state than his could possibly be. Allison tells me that she'd spend hours talking to him, and he'd listen, not saying much. He's been away lately, though."

" Oh, ye-es?" Peter drawled.

Barbara's hands tightened in her lap. She did not know just what Peter was getting at, but when he drawled with that elaborate imitation of unconcern she knew that he was in the throes of hidden excitement.

" He told me that he'd been to the city to see if he couldn't raise a loan, so that he wouldn't lose his place. He didn't have any success, though. The whole trouble is that he didn't have enough capital in the first place, and he didn't realise that it takes just as long to learn farming as to learn bookkeeping. If he'd been brought up on a farm he'd have known that poetry is a poor substitute for a knowledge of agriculture. The bird songs are a by-product—they don't pay the taxes."

" Practical Jerry!" Barbara teased.

" But I felt sorry for him, I tell you—so sorry that it hurt! I think he was almost out of his mind with

grief and worry and not being able to see his way out, whichever way he turned," Jerry insisted. He turned to Peter and added with tardy curiosity, " what did you want to know about him for?"

" Oh, nothing," Peter said with strained casualness, " except that on September ninth Mrs. Cole willed all her real property, which means her fifty-thousand-dollar ranch, to Edward Comstock. And on September tenth Mrs. Cole was dead."

Jerry's freckles stood out in sharply defined brown splotches against the pallor of his face.

" She—she gave the Asbury place to Comstock? But she must have known, then, that—that she was going to die. She must have done it herself, after all."

" That's what Whittlesey thinks."

" Whittlesey?"

" Whittlesey is one of the best criminal lawyers in this state. And Asbury was worried enough to engage him as his lawyer at the inquest. Either that, or Harris did it for him. If he is held under suspicion, he has a right to a legal representative. By Jove, maybe that was a good move Harris made for Asbury when he arrested him—and he'd be just smart enough to see the advantage of legal protection for Asbury's interests, in case anything broke that he wasn't counting on!"

" But if she made a will the day before her death, surely it shows——"

" Maybe," Peter said non-committally. " That's what it looks like. But Comstock, you say, was obsessed with this idea of the ranch, and was almost crazy at the prospect of losing it—not only losing the dream that had sustained him while he kept pegging on, all those years, but being thrown out on the world, without a job, and too old to get one. He must have been in the very pit of despair."

" I think he was," Jerry nodded.

" Then suppose she told him that she had left him the ranch because he had befriended her. It wouldn't mean so much to her financially. She could afford the

gesture. But to him—think what it would mean to him! Only, she was a comparatively young woman, young from his point of view, anyway. Suppose the gesture came too late. Suppose he dropped into the nameless abyss of men without jobs and without resources—dropped there, knowing all the time that when Mrs. Cole died he would have the ranch. Suppose——"

"I've seen him," Jerry whispered in an awestruck voice, "I've seen him staring across the road at the Asbury place. Mrs. Cole had plenty of money to hire workmen to spray her trees. Every spring she had an expert come out from the agricultural college to look things over. Once when I stopped by to speak to him, after I'd been over talking to Allison, he just waved his hand toward the Asbury orchard, and then at his own trees that were eaten up by parasites."

"But he was Mrs. Cole's friend!" Barbara exclaimed. He tried to help her. He cared about the bad time she was having."

"He was a man half-crazed by desperation. He thought there was no way out—and then he learned that there was a way; that the Asbury ranch would come to him, too late," Peter said gravely.

"You think," Jerry gasped, staring at Peter, "you think—he may have done it?"

"I don't know what to think," Peter rasped. "I only wish I did!"

## CHAPTER XXII

A SUPERANNUATED bookkeeper who failed at farming—somehow that doesn't sound like the kind of man to commit a murder." Barbara's brows were drawn together in a contemplative frown. "He seems too negative, too futile—just the sort to be kicked about by fate and succumb because he couldn't help himself. Would a person like that burst into crime all of a sudden?"

With a scant ten minutes left before they must return to the inquest, the three had snatched a hasty lunch at a drug-store counter, scarcely exchanging a word. But the thoughts of all three had been busy with Edward Comstock.

" Well, we can't go and fasten it on him, like blindfold children pinning the tail on the donkey." Peter was puffing at his pipe in rapid jerks, making the most of his opportunity to smoke as they walked along the street, before the resumption of the inquest doomed him to several tobaccoless hours. " But it will certainly bear thinking about. There isn't a scrap of evidence that he did do it, of course—at least, none that we know about."

" He never did it unless he was crazy." Jerry's mouth was set in its most stubborn line. " Still, he was worried almost beyond the limit of endurance. I'm sure he was sincerely fond of Mrs. Cole, or he'd never have told her how things were with him. He wasn't the kind to get a temporary relief by talking things out and complaining. That really made it worse for him. The last time I saw him, when he came back from the city after failing to raise that loan, I thought he might be on the brink of losing his mind. His eyes were so sunken and bright, and he just stood and stared at me, as if he hardly knew who I was. He talked rationally enough, though."

" You know, if he believed all the things Mrs. Cole told him, he might have brooded until he convinced himself that it wouldn't be wrong to put her out of her anguish," Barbara broke in, checking Jerry and clutching his arm in her excitement. " Allison has told me that her mother was always saying she wished she were dead. She said all kinds of wild things, because she was like that. But Comstock might have taken it literally. If life held nothing for her without Asbury, and he knew, as everyone except Mrs. Cole herself knew, that she had lost Asbury irretrievably, he might have been so tormented that he came to look on her

death, not as a crime, but as a release—a release for both herself and him."

"Hm!" Peter blew a final cloud of smoke into the air and knocked his pipe against a tree trunk. "It's all speculation so far. But I certainly do yearn for a somewhat closer acquaintance with Mr. Edward Comstock."

Peter's yearning, however, was doomed to remain unsatisfied for the time being. The afternoon session of the inquest had already begun when he and Barbara pushed their way through the crowd at the door and tiptoed quietly up the aisle to the press table.

"It's not such a bad idea for you to stay with Allison," he murmured to Jerry. "You can keep your eye on the family end of it."

"She pointed out her sister and brother-in-law to me this morning," Jerry whispered in reply. "They're in the seat ahead of us—the stoutish, florid chap and the very dark, slim woman in black. The other two are the men they brought down from the city with them. I slipped Allison out the side door at noon to avoid talking to them. I think she's afraid of them—afraid of her own suspicions—or else they're so closely associated in her mind with the whole ghastly affair at the ranch that she wants to keep away from them as much as possible."

"Sh!" An indignant hiss, accompanied by irate stares from the nearest spectators, sent Jerry slinking away, blushing furiously.

"Who's this?" Peter asked the reporter nearest him, as he flung himself into the seat at the press table. The question was accompanied by a sidewise jerk of the head toward an elderly, shabbily dressed woman who was addressing the jurors in barely audible tones.

Mrs. Myra Smith, cook at the ranch. She's just begun."

Mrs. Smith twisted a pair of worn cotton gloves in knotted trembling fingers. Her pale, red-rimmed eyes stared in terrified fascination at the crowded rows before

her. Her coat, which was several sizes too large for her, was obviously a donation. A thin lock of gray hair straggled from beneath a soiled red-velvet hat, also a gift and patently derived from a source unrelated to the sober, antiquated coat.

"Speak up, Mrs. Smith," called out the pompous juror who had asked the sheriff about the rebound of the gun. "There ain't nobody going to bite you."

"Thank you, Mr. Crandall. I—I ain't never spoke in public before. I get so fussed I don't hardly know what I'm saying."

However, Mrs. Smith had apparently taken comfort from the friendly admonition. She fastened her timid, watery gaze on Mr. Crandall, and addressed her remarks directly to him.

"I've knowed Mrs. Asbury for going on three years." Her voice rose in a thin spurt of courage. "I knew she and Mr. Asbury were having lots of trouble, but I never said nothing. I figured it wasn't none of my business, though of course I couldn't help hearing them, the way they carried on."

Whittlesey's chair squeaked warningly as he leaned forward.

"We all know that Mr. Asbury and the deceased had their difficulties," he said smoothly. "Let's stick to the pertinent facts. Did you ever see this gun that the sheriff showed to the jury this morning?" he waved a pudgy hand toward the weapon, which still lay on the coroner's table. Mrs. Smith glanced obliquely at the gun, as if she feared a more direct gaze might cause it to go off of its own accord.

"Yes, I seen it," she said tremulously. "She showed it to me."

"When?" Whittlesey was again leaning back.

"It was quite some while ago. She was a great one for talking, Mrs. Asbury was. She brought it out to the kitchen and told me not to be scared if I found it under the mattress, because she kept it hid there."

"Ah, yes, it was her own gun, then," Whittlesey

observed as if commenting to himself. But his small bright eyes, almost hidden between rolls of fat, glistened triumphantly at the jurors, bidding them note that the quarrels were inconsequential, but that Mrs. Cole's own gun would be the natural instrument for taking her own life.

"Did she say why she kept it there?" the irrepressible Mr. Crandall inquired.

Whittlesey sank the lowest of his three chins into his collar and surveyed his toes. His pose suggested extreme patience with Mr. Crandall as an intrusive old bore, and mutely appealed for sympathy from the rest of the jury in this childish and unnecessary delay.

"Oh, yes, she told me. She said she hid it because she didn't want Mr. Asbury to get it."

"And why——"

"Just a minute!" Whittlesey's voice, surprisingly loud, drowned out the remainder of Mr. Crandall's question.

Mrs. Smith started violently and looked behind her as if she had braced herself to face the enemy, only to be suddenly attacked from the rear.

Mr. Coroner, in the interests of my client, I must object to the introduction of irrelevant and hearsay testimony."

"I—I didn't mean—excuse me, I'm sure," Mrs. Smith gasped. She looked imploringly first at the windows and then at the floor, as if praying that a convenient hole would open at her feet.

The coroner turned repectfully to Whittlesey.

"Quite right," he said firmly, salvaging his dignity. He mentally resolved to watch out and not lay himself open to such criticism again from the august lawyer from the city. He caught Harris's eye and nodded reassuringly. The chief of police had told him that Whittlesey was a big man who knew all the ropes. He had added, with a jovial pat on the coroner's back, that they'd do well to follow Whittlesey's lead and not let

him think they were small-town folks who didn't know how to handle a case.

"When did you leave the employ of the deceased?" The coroner asked. The ownership of the gun was all they'd really wanted from Mrs. Smith, but that question couldn't do any harm. He eyed Crandall reprovingly, giving him to understand that it wasn't the business of the jurors to take the investigation out of official hands.

"It was just a little while after Mr. Asbury left." Mrs. Smith's voice rose in a rapid squeak. If she talked fast enough it would be over and they'd let her go. "She called me out to look at a car that had just passed. She said it was Mr. Asbury, and there was a woman with him. 'That's the way he always gets them, taking them for drives,' she said, 'and the only way he got a car was because a woman was fool enough to support him for the last six years.' Then she began to cry and said she was deserted and left alone and wouldn't need me to keep house for them any more."

The coroner glanced inquiringly at Whittlesey, but the lawyer's face was bland and his eyes half shut under their heavy white lids.

"I think that's all, Mrs. Smith—unless Mr. Whittlesey has any more questions."

Whittlesey roused himself barely enough to murmur, "No further questions," and sank back into a trance of buddhistic calm.

"Poor old soul, I wish somebody had told her that whatever she said wouldn't be used against her," Barbara whispered in Peter's ear. "But I'm like Mr. Crandall—I'd like to know why Mrs. Cole kept that gun hidden from Asbury."

## CHAPTER XXIII

THE next witness had none of Mrs. Smith's timidity in making a public appearance. He smirked with a singularly unpleasant grimace of his thick, loose-lipped

mouth as he came forward to take the oath, and winked elaborately and confidentially at the audience.

"Your name?"

"William Peters."

"Occupation?"

"Farm labourer."

"May I ask by whom Mr. Peter's was called as a witness?" Whittlesey addressed the coroner, but his face was turned squarely toward Peters. With its pallid expanse of fat, it was expressionless, as a rounded lump of dough.

"He was not called at all, Mr. Whittlesey. He came to me this noon, and said that he had a testimony which he wished to present. Neither the chief of police nor myself have had an opportunity to question him."

"All right. Let's hear what he has to say." Whittlesey billowed back in his chair. His half-shut eyes surveyed Peters with profound distaste.

"If you know anything about this case, just tell the jury as briefly as possible what it is," the coroner said curtly.

"Well, I don't know as I've so much to tell—not about the case, as you might say."

"If you've anything to say, say it."

Peters was unperturbed by the coroner's brusque impatience. He stood with his back half turned, one hip slouched lower than the other, and leered at the jurors as if he knew, or was trying to give the impression that he knew, much more than he had any intention of telling.

"When did you know Mrs. Cole?" the coroner snapped.

"Well, I worked on the Asbury place, off and on, for about two years. The last time I saw Mrs. Asbury was about five months ago, when I quit the ranch."

"Did you ever see this gun?" Mr. Crandall inquired, eyeing the coroner sternly as if to imply that he was a juror who knew his duty and was not to be swerved from it.

" Sure I saw the gun. I found it out in the tool shed and was looking at it when Mrs. Asbury came out and told me to leave it alone. She said it was an old gun she had used on hunting trips. She took it into the house with her, and I never got sight of it after that."

The coroner glanced at the chief of police, who nodded slightly.

" Any further questions, Mr. Whittlesey?"

" The witness may be dismissed, so far as I'm concerned." Whittlesey was sunk in ennui, from which he roused himself barely enough to move his lips.

" That ain't quite all." Peters's eyes roamed the room with a bold stare. " When I was leaving the ranch she give me a note. I've still got it." With extreme deliberation he drew a stained and greasy wallet from the pocket of his jeans and extracted a dirty slip of paper.

The coroner extended his hand for the note, but Peters held it out of his reach.

" I'll read it out loud, so's everybody will know just what's in it," he said, squinting his eye shut in a prodigious wink.

The coroner's face reddened with an angry flush.

" You'd better remember where you are, young man, and stop your monkeyshines. This inquest is being conducted by officers of the law, and there'll be no insinuations from you."

" Oh, let him read it, by all means," Whittlesey said wearily.

" Sure, I'm agoing to read it. It says: ' If anything happens to me, give purse and keys to Edward Comstock.' I thought it looked as if she expected trouble of some sort, so I kept it."

" Never mind what you thought. Is that all?"

" I reckon that's about all." With a final wink, Peters swaggered to his seat.

" What a loathsome creature," Barbara whispered to Peter. " Do you suppose he meant anything?"

" Not a darn thing," Peter growled. " He wanted

a chance to get a seat at the performance, and he enjoyed showing off."

"But they let him——"

"They couldn't help themselves. Whittlesey doesn't care how strong the jury gets it that she kept a gun and handed around notes all over the place indicating that the thought of death was strong in her mind. By itself, that note might look as if she was afraid of Asbury, but coupled with the suicide note on her pillow, and the will she made the day before her death, it looks as if she had been planning to do it if things continued to go wrong, and wanted to help Comstock as much as she could. She wanted him to get whatever money she had on hand. Willing him the ranch was probably an afterthought. That's one way to figure it, and it's as good as any."

"Oh!"

Peter looked up sharply, for Barbara had turned away from him with a startled intake of breath. Her face was chalk white, but aside from a reassuring pressure on her arm, Peter at the moment had no time for Barbara. The coroner was holding up before the jury the bloodstained clothes which Mrs. Cole had been wearing when she was found on the kitchen floor.

"This—this kimono, I suppose you'd call it——"

"Oh, does he have to be funny?" Barbara moaned. "Why doesn't he say it's the top of a pyjama lounging suit and have done with it?"

"The poor boob doesn't know." Peter thought it unnecessary to tell Barbara that he had not known either, and was grateful for the exact definition.

"It—it's not the blood on it that makes it so awful. It's the intolerable pity of trying to win him back with —that."

The silken garment was crushed and stiff with blood, but it still flaunted its sophisticated gaiety in a brilliant pattern of yellow, green, and lacquer red against a background of black.

"These are the slippers——"

"Mules," Barbara corrected tersely. "Oh, Peter, look at them."

There was no visible mark of blood on the black satin mules. They were apparently almost new, with jaunty high French heels, and provocative bright yellow pompoms which caught a wandering breath of air and quivered slightly in the coroner's hands.

Peter's grasp on Barbara's arm tightened.

"Watch!" He bent his lips close to her ear. "Look across the room and watch the Lawrences and Allison and Asbury."

After one brief look at the gruesome exhibit with its incongruous mingling of luxurious brightness and dull horror Allison had turned away. Her hands were clenched on the back of the bench in front of her. Jerry, unconscious of spectators, had laid one arm protectingly across her shoulders.

Asbury lounged in his seat with swaggering unconcern. His eyes were vacantly indifferent, but the moment Peter ventured a steady glance at him, Asbury caught the direction of his gaze and stared him down. His jaws moved methodically, daring any one to suppose that he had anything in the world to think of but chewing gum.

Peter returned the defiant stare with a faint smile. Asbury's pose of hardened nonchalance was obviously self-conscious. He wore an old gray shirt, open at the throat, a shabby sweater, and a pair of dingy corduroy trousers, as if he refused to concede, even by his dress, that he had any interest in the affair which had brought him to his seat in the front row at the inquest, with a sheriff's deputy at his side. Not for a single moment did his jaws cease their rhythmic working.

"Gum—the great American resource in times of stress!" Peter mused. "If only he knew how many murderers I've seen being tried for their lives and sentenced to hang chewing gum all the while, he mightn't have tried to conceal his nervousness in that particular

fashion. He's like a small boy, scared to death, but saying, ' I don't care,' very loud."

His glance shifted from Asbury to the two whom Jerry had pointed out to him as John and Elsie Lawrence. Lawrence was staring with a wide-eyed, fascinated gaze at the bloodstained garments, as if they pulled him against his will with a hypnotic power. His arms were crossed on his chest, and Peter saw that his fingers were clawing at the sleeves of his coat; the cloth was caught in a wrinkled bunch under their stiff clutch. His florid face was glazed with a film of sweat. Peter leaned forward to obtain a closer look at the heavy chin, thick lips, and high forehead from which the hair already receded in a wide inverted V at each temple.

Peter's swift mental comment raced on. " He doesn't like all this—he doesn't like it a little bit. That's a man that I should not like to have hating me. He wouldn't bother to hate very many people, because he doesn't need to—but he'd be an ugly customer if he was roused. And, once roused, he wouldn't forget. He's staring at those clothes as if he thought she'd got very much what was coming to her. One thing is certain, there's no pity in that look. He couldn't pretend if he tried—and he isn't trying—that he's sorry she's dead."

John Lawrence's were not the only eyes riveted on the frivolous black and yellow mules and the dabbled jacket with its bright bizarre pattern blurred and blotted by thick dull stains. The woman beside him was oblivious of his presence oblivious of every presence save that of the fluttering garments which the coroner held extended in both hands.

She was a beautiful woman in her fashion—a fashion that recalled the subtly decadent faces of the later Renaissance. Her height and the blackness of her eyes and hair gave her a certain family resemblance to Allison, but there the likeness ended. The line of her small pointed chin sloped upward in an exquisite curve to the lobe of her ear. There was a hint of voluptuousness in the full red lips, which drooped at the corners

in a habitual expression of wilful mutiny. Athough the face was still youthful, it was not happy; already a narrow vertical line between the arched and carefully tended eyebrows marked a permanent frown of discontent.

Her profile was turned toward Peter, and he sensed something vaguely disquieting in the clear-cut features. It was a beautiful, eager, restless face, but a face without peace. Peter fumbled for a word. Predatory! That was it. The face of a woman far more likely to be the cause of tragedy than to suffer it. Selfishness was clearly written on those red, curved lips, and yet there was something oddly pitiful, if one sought to look beneath the first effect of exotic beauty. It was the face of one hounded by some inner compulsion which had carved it to that thin clarity of line—a restless seeking for satisfaction, at the mercy of every tyrannous momentary impulse which flared and faded and left her spent and unassuaged.

"One of the Borgias—that's it!" Peter said half aloud. "If that woman cut her finger she'd think the man who sold her the knife deserved the rack. And she's always been allowed to think it. That's the worst of being rich—she's never found out that the world doesn't owe her one solitary thing in the way of happiness, and that eternal justice does not mean that every path should be smoothed before her feet."

"Oh, Peter—Peter, look!" Barbara's voice was not raised above a whisper, but her fingers gripped his wrist with startled urgency.

The reporters shifted in their chairs and craned their necks to see across the room. The coroner turned from the jury and dropped the satin mules with a clatter to the floor.

"Get a glass of water, will you, Sheriff?"

Elsie Lawrence, her eyes still fixed on the blood-stained jacket, had half risen to her feet, and then had fallen forward in a dead faint across the back of the bench before her.

## CHAPTER XXIV

THE entrance of Edward Comstock carried with it a chill of anticlimax, after the brief confusion caused by Mrs. Lawrence's faint. The spectators settled back in their seats resignedly. Although Lawrence had assisted his wife as she tottered down the aisle to the undertaker's office at the rear, Peter noticed that he did not remain with Elsie but returned almost immediately to his place. His interest in following each step of the proceedings evidently outweighed his anxiety for his wife—in fact, there had been something curiously stolid and matter-of-fact in the brisk efficiency with which he had seen to her removal as soon as her eyelids fluttered open. With a slight shrug, Peter dismissed Lawrence for the time being from his attention, and turned to the man who had stepped quietly forward and was now facing the jury.

His first impression of Edward Comstock was of an all-pervading grayness. He was a tall, thin man, with shoulders that drooped forward from years of bending over a desk. The stoop was so pronounced that it caused his cheap gray coat to hitch upward at the back. His suit was of the nondescript colour and cut chosen by a man whose only ambition in dress was for his clothes to pass unnoticed from year to year. It almost seemed that his thinning gray hair shared in the hope of unobtrusiveness. His whole appearance suggested the bookkeeper to whom younger men would refer with supercilious contempt as " Old Comstock," rather than the farmer.

And yet, in that curious fashion, the colourless old man in his ill-fitting clothes dominated the room. His testimony was given succinctly without an extraneous word. It was immediately apparent that he would say everything he had came to say, without guidance or deflection by the coroner, Whittlesey, or the silent but

watchful chief of police. As soon as he had taken the oath he ignored the officials altogether, turning his back on them and addressing the jury in a low but distinct voice.

" I have known Mrs. Asbury—Mrs. Cole, rather—for two years," he began. " My house is right across the road from the Asbury place, and I heard and saw a good deal of what went on there, in addition to what Mrs. Cole herself told me. When Mr. Asbury finally left, six months ago, she followed him out to the road, crying and pleading with him.

" ' Don't do this to me, Roy. Stay! Think of all I have done for you,' she cried out, clinging to the door of the car.

" I heard him say, ' No, this is the end of it, I tell you,' and he pried her fingers off the door and drove away, leaving her standing there. I know, however, that he came back several times after that, in response to telephone calls and letters from her. She said she could not help it, that she could not give him up.

" On various occasions afterwards she told me that she had spent $50,000 on the ranch, just to have a place where he would be contented, and that she would do everything in her power to ruin his business in order to bring him back to her. She even talked about financing his competitors in order to cut in on his trade."

" Just a moment!" Whittlesey's huge hand was lifted in protest. " What were the dates and places of these conversations?"

" I kept no record of the dates," Comstock brushed the interruption aside. Whittlesey hesitated. Comstock had refused to discuss his testimony in advance, and he was not certain whither it would lead; but he decided to await a more definite danger signal.

" I argued with her, trying to persuade her not to interfere with Asbury's business, but she insisted that she could not give Asbury up. She was very much upset by the idea that he was going about with other women. She told me that he admitted having dates and

that he defied her to interfere. She asked me not to allow Asbury to get into the house in her absence."

"Did she give any reason for that?" Mr. Crandall interjected, leaning forward eagerly with both hands on his knees.

The chief of police fidgeted in his chair and cast an imploring look toward Whittlesey. The lawyer caught the glance, but his only response was a slight wave of the hand. He continued to survey Comstock with bland impassivity, as if he were looking at him only because the witness chanced to be in his line of vision.

"She said that she feared for her life."

"Were those her exact words?" Harris, goaded for the first time to speech, asked sharply.

"Her exact words were: 'I have a gun and he knows it. If ever you hear a shot, come over right away. You might find me dead on the kitchen floor any day. He is so cold-blooded, he might do anything.' I asked her why she did not get rid of the gun, and she told me she kept it for self-protection. Then she added—she was greatly agitated at the time—'If the worst comes to the worst I'll use it on him and myself too, and anybody else who comes between us.' Those, I believe, were the only direct references to the gun."

The chief of police leaned forward tensely. The coroner turned to Whittlesey with a worried frown.

"Any questions, Mr. Whittlesey?"

"Well, yes, I have a few questions." Whittlesey puffed his lips in a barely audible sigh. "Mrs Cole was in a highly overwrought mental condition, I believe you said, when she made these accusations concerning Mr. Asbury?"

"She was always more or less overwrought. She constantly brooded over Asbury's treatment of her, and seemed unable to think of anything but contriving to get him back."

"And she also threatened to take her own life with the gun?"

"Yes, she did say, as I've told you, that she might

kill herself and him and any one else who was in the way. But I think it was just wild talk."

"You can hardly testify as to what you think Mrs. Cole meant," Whittlesey reminded him blandly. "Was she in the same brooding, overwrought mental condition during the days immediately preceding her death?"

"Cute boy!" Peter thumped his fist silently on the table. "He's pulling those chestnuts out of the fire, for sure."

"I was not at home for a week preceding Mrs. Asbury's death. I got back on the morning of Tuesday, the last day of her life. However, I had two letters from her," Comstock announced in the same drab tones.

"Have you those letters?"

"I have not."

"But you remembered their contents?"

"I do. In the first, she asked me to make an appointment for her with her dressmaker while I was in the city. In the second, she told me that Mr. Asbury had promised to come out to the ranch on Tuesday evening, but that she had a premonition that all might not go well. That was about all."

"The first letter, then, in which she asked you to make an appointment for her, was written several days before the one in which she appeared depressed by the premonition that her meeting with Asbury would not do any good?"

The question was purely rhetorical. Whittlesey's sleepy eyes swerved to Crandall as he asked it. Crandall was just the kind of juror who would seize on the idea that a woman intending to take her life does not make dressmaker's appointments. It must be hammered home to him that Mrs. Cole had written about the dressmaker before falling into a state of acute depression regarding her love affair with Asbury.

"I don't know whether her premonition indicated depression or fear—she did not say," Comstock corrected him gently.

" Never mind your interpretations, please. The letters did come in that order?"

" Yes."

" You reached home on Tuesday morning, and Mrs. Cole had told you to come over if you heard a shot. Did you hear the shot on Tuesday evening?"

" I did not."

" You were at home?"

There was an instant's pause before Comstock answered quietly, " Yes."

" And you could have heard a rifle shot fired in the kitchen of the Asbury house?"

" I did not hear it."

" Why not?"

This time the pause lengthened almost interminably.

Peter glanced up from his copy paper and turned so that he had a clear view of Comstock's face. The eyes in their sunken sockets were no longer a weak and faded gray. The pupils had expanded until they were almost black. His hand was knotted on the table behind him, the bony knuckles protruding whitely.

" I was drunk!" he shouted in a loud, hoarse voice.

Whittlesey contemplated the ceiling through half-shut eyes.

" Oh. you are a drinking man, Mr. Comstock? Perhaps some of these conversations in which Mrs. Cole expressed apprehensions of violence were somewhat confused in your memory by the effect of liquor?"

" I am not a drinking man," Comstock's voice sank to a dreary monotone. " I was never drunk before in my life. But I was drunk that night. That is why I failed—my friend—in her last extremity. I was drunk. I did not hear the shot. So—I did not go to her."

" Are you in any financial difficulties, Mr. Comstock?" Whittlesey withdrew his eyes from the ceiling, dismissing the topic of Comstock's alcoholic habits.

The chief of police lifted his head with a warning glance. But there was no one to tell Comstock it was his legal right to refuse to answer the question.

Comstock's thin lips twisted in a strange contortion which bore a grotesque resemblance to a smile.

"Financial difficulty is hardly the word. I am a ruined and penniless man." The stooped shoulders straightened, and the dark, burning eyes faced the assemblage with the last pride of defeat.

"Oh! and Mrs. Cole doubtless told you that she was making a will in your favour?"

"She told me on several occasions that she wished she could help me out. But she was using all her financial resources in the effort to make Asbury return to the ranch."

"Then your good offices in trying to persuade her not to spend money on hindering his business were not altogether disinterested, eh?"

"They were disinterested, yes. Her efforts could come to no good. She would only make herself more unhappy by all this struggling to win back a man who had definitely cast her off. She could not think much about my affairs, nor anybody's, in fact, but her own, though I knew she was sorry that things were going badly with me. I did not talk with her a great deal about it. Certainly I had no real hope of financial aid from her. I knew she would use every dollar she had to try to get Asbury back, as long as she was alive." The explanation was given in a dry, expressionless voice, without even a spark of anger at Whittlesey's insinuation.

"As long as she was alive—exactly," Whittlesey crooned. "You say that you were drunk, for the first time in your life, on the night when Mrs. Cole was shot. You were aware that on the day before she had made a will leaving you her fifty-thousand-dollar ranch property?"

"I did not know that—no."

"She might have told you some time after your return on Tuesday."

"She might have, but she didn't."

"If Mrs. Cole had lived and had effected a recon-

ciliation with Asbury, or hoped to do so, she might change her mind and revise the will?"

"Certainly she might—in fact, she probably would. It was doubtless a temporary impulse on her part, because I wrote her from the city that I had not succeeded in raising money to keep my ranch."

"Her death on the day following the making of the will, then, raised you from ruin to safety and affluence?"

For the second time Comstock's voice burst from his throat in a loud, hoarse cry.

"No, it can't do that, because I will not accept the legacy. She thought of me on her last day on earth. And then—I had promised to go to her—and I failed her. I betrayed her trust in me. I cannot take her money, after that!"

The thin gray figure swayed on its feet. Then, with an odd, shabby dignity, Comstock steadied himself and stood facing the jury.

"No more questions," Whittlesey said indifferently.

"Stay where we can get hold of you," the chief of police commanded, as Comstock turned to go. "We may want to question you further."

Comstock nodded without speaking.

"You may go now," the coroner said not unkindly. "Ladies and gentlemen, the inquest will now adjourn till ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

Whittlesey and the chief of police drew their chairs together until their heads almost touched.

"Comstock looked dangerous for a minute," Harris said anxiously.

"Well, I'd rather have kept hammering on suicide myself," Whittlesey yawned. "But we can't have the jury taking too seriously all that talk about her expecting Asbury to shoot her. Now they'll argue about whether Comstock could or couldn't have done it, and end by discounting his testimony because they won't know how much of it to believe."

"At that, he might be a good suspect——"

" You'd feel a lot better if you could make an arrest, wouldn't you?" Whittlesey smiled indulgently. " But the main thing is to clear Asbury, and the most thorough way to put him completely out of it is to show that she did it herself. Besides," he added as an afterthought, " she really did."

Harris took a cigar from his pocket and thoughtfully bit off the end. For the life of him, he did not know whether Whittlesey was playing up or whether he was sincerely convinced. But so long as he earned the large retainer which had been been paid him, it really did not matter.

## CHAPTER XXV

" HANG it all!" Peter flung himself back from the typewriter in deep disgust. " As a straight news story it's easy enough to write, and that's all I have to bother about for the time being. There was that grimacing baboon of a farm hand for a surprise witness, and the notes she seemed to hand around pretty generally, and the testimony of that poor scared rabbit, Mrs. Smith, as well as of Peters and Comstock, that she not only kept a gun, but had it pretty actively on her mind, and Comstock himself as a titivating bit of mystery. It's good for a column on Page One any day. And yet as it stands all that nice objective news doesn't mean a durned thing." He twisted a sheet of copy paper into a ball and flung it angrily across the room.

Barbara had persuaded Allison to spend the night at the hotel. White and exhausted by the ordeal of the day, Allison had been too tired to protest, and had submitted like a child to Barbara's ministrations of warm milk, a hot-water bottle at her feet, and firm, gentle fingers tucking the covers about her shoulders. Her eyes followed Barbara's quick deft movements as she adjusted the window, and then welled with sudden tears as Barbara stooped to kiss her good-night. Her hand

reached out in a convulsive pressure of the older girl's fingers—a confiding movement that was more expressive than the most voluble thanks.

Barbara's own eyes were blinking mistily as she hurried down the hall to Peter's room, where Jerry was already swinging his feet from the footrail of the bed.

"Poor child!" she said softly, with a maternal tenderness that contrasted quaintly with her own youth. "Do you know, I don't believe she's ever had anybody to take care of her and tell her just to lie still before."

Jerry's feet stopped swinging.

"That's the job I want to get. I want to take care of her." He glared sternly at Barbara, defying her to smile at his qualifications as a protector.

But though Barbara smiled straight into his eyes, her look was not one of amusement.

"I believe you will," she said earnestly. "And I don't know any one who could do it better. Allison's been badly hurt, and I'm very fond of her already. It isn't every one I'd want to trust her to. But you'll do, Jerry."

Jerry's freckles disappeared in a deep flush, but his eyes did not waver.

"I know it's a big thing for a young cub like me to try for," he said. "To have you feel like that about it—well, it means a lot to me, Mrs. Piper."

Barbara laid her hand on his shoulder for a moment in a warm, comradely pressure. Then her chin tilted upward with an elfish smile as she looked across the room at the glowering Peter.

"What's Peter hurtling paper wads about for?" she asked.

"It's like a place that itches and you can't scratch," Peter exploded. "It's like listening to a loud, ordinary tune, and hearing another tune in the distance that you can't quite catch. The facts are there, but what in hell do they mean?"

" Never mind the ladies, if that's the way you feel about it," Barbara teased.

Peter wadded another sheet of copy paper and hurled it into her lap.

" ' That ain't no lady—that's a newspaper man's wife.' Here I've written a perfectly good story, and I feel as if I might just as well have been copying out ' The Star-Spangled Banner.' "

Barbara wrinkled her nose thoughtfully.

" Sh!" Peter hissed to Jerry in a stage whisper. " When she wrinkles her nose like that it's a sign of deep cogitation."

" The trouble with you is, Peter," Barbara said, ignoring his comment, " that you're trying to look at everything all at once. You can't see the trees for the wood. Let's all get together and make a list of the things we've noticed. It won't give us an answer, of course, but it will help to get things clear. We might begin with the gun. That seemed to interest everybody, including the funny juror who refused to be squelched."

" That's not a bad idea. Trust Barbara's nose—it knows." Peter took a pad of paper from the typewriter table, balanced it on his knee, and wrote " Gun " in large black letters across the top. " You first, Jerry. What do we know about the gun?"

" Well, of course, it was her own gun, and she'd had it for quite a long time. She'd used it for hunting. That means she was used to firearms. She wouldn't be afraid of handling it, and she'd have known enough to put it on the table and reach the trigger with a stick, so far as that goes."

" That last point is getting a bit ahead of the story," Peter objected. " Let's stick to the time that was covered to-day. She showed the gun, or talked about it, to a good many people. That shows it wasn't just an old hunting rifle that happened to be around. It seemed to be a good deal on her mind."

" Yes," Barbara added. " She not only had it, but she kept it near her, even hiding it under the mattress.

That brings up three questions: Why was the gun so much on her mind that she had to talk about it, why did she have it where she could readily get at it, and why did she hide it? Let's jot down what she herself said about it."

"She told the cook that she didn't want Asbury to find it," Jerry ticked off the points on his fingers. "She told Comstock that she expected Asbury to shoot her with it, that he must not let Asbury into the house when she was not there for fear he would find it, that he might find her dead on the floor and should come at once if he heard a shot." He paused out of breath.

"Wait a minute till I catch up," Peter begged. "That's A, B, and C from Comstock."

"Ye-es," Barbara frowned, "but if she was afraid Asbury would murder her with the gun why didn't she get rid of it instead of leaving it about?"

"She also told Comstock that she had it for self-protection," Jerry argued.

"And that if necessary she'd use it on both of them, and Comstock, too, if he was in the way," Barbara retorted.

"No, she didn't say just that," Peter corrected her. "She said, 'anybody who was in the way.'"

"That's true," Barbara admitted. "But I rather thought she meant that Comstock might be in the way, essaying the rôle of peacemaker."

"You know," Peter thumped the table with the end of his pencil, "something does seem to emerge, and it's this. I believe she must at least have played with the idea of using the gun herself. Otherwise she'd have got rid of it, as Barbara says. If Asbury wanted to kill her he could get plenty of other things to do it with; he wouldn't have to find and use that particular weapon. I don't say she did use it, and I don't say she wasn't afraid of Asbury's killing her. But it wasn't a simple fear of violence. It was a sort of obsession, mixed up with a hidden desire. She could have got out of his way easily enough, but she didn't want to. If she'd

let him alone he'd certainly have let her alone—in fact, that was just about all he was asking. But life to her meant nothing but her love affair with Asbury. The only alternative to that love in her mind was death. And only a violent death would be a fitting end to the violence of her love. She told Comstock that she might kill Asbury with the gun, and because that idea was in her mind she transferred it readily enough into the idea that he might kill her with it."

"But she didn't kill him with it," Barbara protested. "And if he killed her at all he did it with her own gun, just as she feared."

"No, she didn't, as it happens. And of course, we don't know whether he did or not, but if he did, I don't think it was any premeditation, such as going into the house to search for it would imply. She might have threatened him, and he might have wrenched it from her and killed her. But that's all speculation. The main thing is that we've worked out a reasonable explanation of her own conduct with reference to the gun. Now let's see if we can figure out all those notes."

"It did strike me," Barbara said, "that while the one note on her pillow the night of her death looked like suicide, the note she gave to the farm hand and the letter she wrote to Comstock and even the will, taken all together, made it seem as if that sort of note had become almost a habit."

"Yes," Jerry agreed, "I thought of that, too. It's one instance where a cumulation weakens instead of strengthening the effect."

"It hitches on to the gun part," Peter said slowly. "The idea of death was strongly in her mind, as an intention, or a revenge, or a fear. It's certainly a coincidence that she made a will the day before she died and left a note on her pillow to be found directly afterward. But if she had died immediately after she gave that other note to the farm hand, the coincidence would have been just as striking—only it's one that didn't happen. The idea of her death was a general one which had been

in her mind for some time. But I wonder if a person who dramatised the thought of suicide to that extent, setting the stage any number of times, wouldn't be just that much less likely to carry it out. The impulse would get a certain amount of release by so much talking and writing."

"There's one other thing about that," Barbara suggested. "She never talked directly about taking her own life. It was always, 'if anythings happens to me.' And granting that she meant suicide by the something that might happen, I don't believe she'd do it without Asbury on the scene. She talked about 'taking them both,' you know. If she killed herself she'd want it to be in his presence, as a final proof of the intensity of her love, or to make him feel sorry for her. She'd want her climax to have its audience. She had no idea of sparing him—she'd want to shock and horrify him as much as possible. And with all her talk that no other woman should have him, I can't see her taking herself off and leaving him to the others. Hers wasn't the meek Elaine sort of unrequited affection. She was frantically jealous. And jealousy is about the most self-centred, utterly egoistic passion there is. If she couldn't have him for herself she wouldn't let him go unscathed."

"Well, that's an argument for the theory of a plot to throw the blame on Asbury, just as Harris says," Jerry propounded.

"Ah, but the notes don't carry it out!" Jerry jumped to his feet, sending his chair clattering backward. "She couldn't leave a note on her pillow to imply, 'I think Asbury's coming out to murder me to-night, so I'm all prepared.' She couldn't plan to have her suicide look like murder and at the same time leave a message pointing plainly to suicide. That neat little reconstruction of the chief of police is ruled out completely. That's the one thing in the whole blamed business that checks. It's only negative, but whatever happened, that didn't."

"Speaking of the chief of police," Barbara said, he's supposed to be holding Asbury on suspicion. Yet he hasn't asked a single question of any of the witnesses."

"He's smart enough to hand things over to an expert when he's got one," Jerry explained. "It's a safe bet that Asbury didn't know enough to hire Whittlesey on his own. I don't know what Whittlesey thinks, but Harris is scared to death that Asbury did it. And if Asbury gets hooked everything will be split wide open, and our promising politician's career will be ruined, because Asbury's recent past, including his bootlegging partnership with Harris, would be sure to come out. Harris isn't trying to bring anything to light. Every single witness is potential dynamite. He doesn't know what really happened, any more than we do. Therefore, he's very wisely sitting quiet and not lighting any fuses that might lead to an explosion."

Peter stretched mightily and restored the chair to its proper place by the table.

"Well, I'm sort of cheered by all this powwow, though I'm sure I don't know why. There's a long way to go yet, but at least we've put a few things together to make sense. I move we call it a day. That telegraph operator is heroically staying by the ship, waiting for my night wire—chiefly because he can't sleep peacefully till he gets his bit of gossip."

"There's still Comstock——"

"Comstock's something else again. I have it in mind to take Bossy out the first thing to-morrow morning and pay Comstock an early call, before the inquest reopens."

## CHAPTER XXVI

The sound of Peter's brisk knock on the front door of Comstock's house had hardly died away when the door was flung wide open, revealing Comstock himself in the

entrance. Although it was barely nine o'clock in the morning, he was not only fully dressed for the street, in the same shabby gray suit which he had worn at the inquest on the day before, but he held a faded gray hat, its nap worn to smoothness by repeated brushing.

"I've come rather early——" Peter began apologetically.

But Comstock interrupted him before he had time to finish the sentence.

"I'm quite ready to go with you," he said surprisingly.

Peter blinked, and bent upon Comstock the bright, inquiring gaze of his quizzical gray eyes.

"Where do you think I wanted you to go?" he asked.

"I suppose you're from the police. Well, I said I'd be ready, and I am. It was kind of them not to send a man in uniform. I appreciate that." His patient, hopeless voice was touched with transient warmth, and he bowed with a gracious nod of his uncovered gray head, as if, even though all was lost, he still owed it to something within himself to show a courteous gratitude to any one who showed him consideration.

"You think I've come to arrest you?" Peter's long face broke into an irrepressible smile.

"I hadn't thought, until yesterday, that any one could possibly suppose I had anything to do with the death of Mrs. Cole. But evidently that construction can be put upon what I told," Comstock said, still in that curiously toneless voice. "I've only a few weeks left to think of this place as mine, and I'll admit I'd like to have spent those weeks here. But it cannot matter much." His stooped shoulders shrugged deprecatingly. "It's sentimentality, I guess, and you won't care much about that. Shall we start now?"

"Not as far as I'm concerned," Peter assured him with one of his most insouciant grins. "I'm not a policeman. I'm a reporter. Just now I'm not even that, for I have no intention of printing whatever you

say to me, supposing that you care to say anything. My only motive is a consuming curiosity."

Comstock held the door wider and stepped back into the hall.

"Come in," he said without further comment.

Without a word he ushered Peter into the living-room and motioned him to a chair. Then, in the pause while Peter considered his opening tactics, Comstock abruptly took the offensive with a question of his own.

"What is it you think I know?"

Peter glanced at him sharply and noted the darkening of Comstock's eyes in their cavernous sockets. His voice was calm, but the hand that rested on the back of a chair showed whitened knuckles under the intensity of his grip.

"I don't know what you know, nor even what you think," Peter answered imperturbably. "That's one of the things that puzzled me about your testimony. It was clear enough, and yet it was somehow confused. Sometimes it indicated that Mrs. Cole was in a state of mind leading to suicide, and at others it looked as if you were making out that she was in fear of her life from Asbury."

"I merely told what had happened." Comstock's fingers released their hold on the chair back. He sat down, as if he had gauged Peter and had decided in that moment's scrutiny to give him a certain amount of confidence. "And what did you infer from this—er—lack of simplicity in my testimony?"

It occurred to Peter that Comstock had taken the interview into his own hands and was asking questions rather than answering them.

"It might mean," he ventured, "that you really do know something and were trying to throw off suspicion doubly by indicating that either suicide or murder by Asbury was altogether plausible. On the other hand, it might mean that you were really confused in your own mind and therefore, as you say,

told things just as they happened, without trying to bring them into any sort of coherence."

"I see." Comstock nodded slowly, without raising his eyes. "So you think I might have done it."

"I didn't say that!" Peter protested quickly.

"I know you didn't." Comstock sighed deeply like a man who has walked a long way and is mortally weary. "But I'd like you to be frank with me. Surely you know that I am beyond having my feelings hurt by mere words. I'd like you to tell me just how it looks to you, on that supposition."

Peter squirmed uncomfortably. He was as nearly immune to embarrassment as only an experienced newspaper reporter can be, but there was something uncanny in this decorously worded request that he should tell a man why he might be a likely suspect for murder. He stared contemplatively at the bowed figure in the chair. A wave of pity for the broken man swept over him, and with that pity came the clear realisation that mercy lay indeed in perfect candour.

"It does look bad that you needed money desperately, and that Mrs. Cole's death occurred immediately after she made the will which would save you. You had motive, you see, and opportunity. You knew about the gun. You could easily have watched your chance to get it at any time while she was out of the house on Tuesday." Peter plunged on, hesitantly at first, and then more rapidly, swept along by the stream of his own argument.

"But I will not take the legacy!" Comstock had not moved a muscle, but his eyes, burning with suppressed excitement, were raised compellingly to Peter's.

"You might be a good actor and have said that for its effect on the jury," Peter persisted. "Or you might have succumbed to the fear, now that the deed was done, of rousing suspicion if you profited by her death."

"Motive and opportunity." Comstock repeated the words slowly, as if they formed part of some ritual.

"But she was my friend. You forget that—she was my friend. You know she made me angry at first. It seemed so silly that any one who had enough money to live on without worry should think that her life could be wrecked by a mere emotional storm. If she had faced beggary, as I faced it, if she had known that the wreck of her dreams meant, not mere disappointment but utter extinction, as I knew it—then she could indeed have asked me to feel sorry for her! And yet I came to do just that. Her mirage was as real to her as hard inexorable facts were to me. She was a cruelly mistaken woman. But she suffered.

"It seems a queer thing that this woman who had no idea of what stark physical want means should have asked for and received the pity of a man soon to be a homeless tramp. I pitied her because she could not help her fate any more than I could help mine. Both of us were caught—caught in a trap of our own making, from which there was no escape. And then—I let her die. I did not go to her."

Comstock's voice dropped into silence. He sat staring before him for a long moment. Then he suddenly sat erect and rigid, turning to Peter with a strange intensity.

"Do you know why I let you come in? Why I wanted to talk to you? It was to ask you this: What effect do you think liquor would have on a man who had never taken it—who came back from his last effort, knowing that he was ruined, and drank until he lost all idea of what he was doing? I did not hear that shot, I tell you! I did not hear it! And yet——"

Unconsciously Peter reached out his hand and laid it quietly on Comstock's arm.

"Just what do you mean?" he asked in bewilderment. It struck him for the moment that the old man might indeed be insane.

When Comstock spoke again his voice was little more than a dry whisper, but he had pulled himself together in strained control.

"What effect would it have? You haven't told me that."

"But I don't know. I haven't the faintest idea." Peter tried to speak reassuringly, but his own throat was oddly dry.

"I will tell you why I will not take the legacy," Comstock said in a harsh, rattling voice. "It's because I am afraid it is blood money. I don't remember. I can't remember anything at all that happened after I came from the city on Tuesday. It may be, as they suggested, that she told me about the will. I know that she would have been glad to help me if she could. I don't recall her telling me, but when I came back, knowing that there was no hope for me, and sat down with that bottle of whisky, everything became a swirling haze—like the wild things that you dream and then forget."

"Good heavens, man," Peter said in awestruck tones, "it's the greatest wonder in the world you did not kill yourself outright!"

"It might have been a good thing if I had." The fire died out of Comstock's eyes, leaving them blank and almost colourless. "I don't know what I did in those hours. I don't know what my subconscious mind may not have dragged up out of the bottomless pit and have tempted me to do. When I try to think back there are only wild fragments of nightmare. I try to grasp them, to force them into the light—and they are gone." He bowed his head, clasping it in both hands, as if by sheer physical force he could command that swirling mist to clear. "I remember that I knew there was nothing—nothing left for me to do. I had made my last effort, and failed. If anything—anything under heaven—had occurred to me that night by which I could save myself I would have done it. I did not hear the shot—that is God's truth. But how—how can I know that it was not I who fired it?"

## CHAPTER XXVII

PETER PIPER flung himself panting into his seat at the press table and mechanically fished out his paper and pencil. The second day's session of the inquest had already opened. For once, Peter's job interfered with an acute desire to be somewhere else. He did not dare leave the covering of the inquest to the inexperienced Jerry, but the memory of the man he had left at the ranch worried him. He had had to hurry away—he was late as it was. But Comstock, after his outburst, had been quiet—too quiet. He had even smiled with a humourless twist of the lips at Peter's awkward efforts to be reassuring.

Peter wondered if he might have found something more comforting to say. His stammering attempts had been weakened by the horrified consciousness that Comstock might indeed have fired the shot that killed Mrs. Cole. If he did he was irresponsible, but Peter was a veteran of the criminal courts, and he knew that if Comstock ever came to trial, his chances of getting off on a plea of temporary insanity were very slim. That dodge had been worked so often that juries were likely to regard it almost facetiously—which was too bad, because in Comstock's case the defence would have been absolutely justified. If he had been a pretty girl with a love motive they'd look at it differently; but the ordinary jury was not an imaginative body. It would have no bias of sympathy toward a stooping old man caught in the clutches of a fate beyond his will.

Peter's foot tapped the floor in a frenzy of impatience. If Comstock was the murderer Peter would have done a good deal to help him to escape—and it did not even strike him that his attitude was somewhat odd for a hardened graduate of the court beat to take. He ought never to have left Comstock alone. Why, the old man was helpless as a pup! He should have told him to

clear out and then have seen that he did it. And instead of that he was cooped up for hours, listening to a doctor describe the precise nature of Mrs. Cole's wounds in language that wouldn't mean a thing to the readers of the *Herald*.

The doctors were engaging in a prolonged altercation as to whether the shot had been fired through the mouth or the side of the head. A word here and there pierced the tumult of Peter's thoughts. A hole in the roof of her mouth was designated by one physician as the laceration made by the entrance of the bullet. Another maintained that it was caused by the explosion of gases from a shot fired at very close range above the right ear. Good heavens, what difference did it make?

Somehow, without even being aware of it, Peter found that he had written down the names and initials of the competing medical witnesses. Peter was a good reporter, and he would have probably have noted names and initials if he were being dashed to earth in a flaming airplane. One of the doctors was holding up an X-ray film, still damp, insisting with academic precision that it proved his point, The jury obediently turned its collective gaze on the film, giving it polite attention without a glimmer of comprehension.

"No powder marks . . . explosion of gases . . . fired in direct contact with the skin or at a distance of three feet at the farthest."

If Asbury was cleared Comstock would be in for a bad time. The jury didn't care about all this expert stuff. Suppose they did bring in a verdict of suicide. Harris and Whittlesey between them would doubtless get Asbury off all right, but that man Crandall was suspicious and eager to demonstrate his importance as a member of the coroner's jury. He would probably keep them from dismissing the case with a plain suicide verdict.

But it was the doubt in Comstock's own mind that mattered most. No jury could absolve him of that doubt; his peace could not be bought by the votes of

twelve men. His own lost, bewildered soul was his accuser. "Beyond reasonable doubt." The law demanded that a man's guilt must be proved beyond reasonable doubt. But the law in a man's soul was different. Comstock would have to prove to himself that he was innocent beyond reasonable doubt, or face the torture of suspicion that he had slain his friend for money.

Orestes pursued by the furies. The ageing man with the weight of dismal failure upon him was not much like a heroic figure of Greek tragedy. He was more likely to degenerate into a highway bum. And yet—it wasn't a man's soul that wore a shabby gray suit. Orestes, fleeing from the furies of remorse, had been in his way a highway bum. In the greatness of his capacity for suffering, Comstock expanded before Peter's vision, at home in the mighty tragic company of those on whom fate has waited with slow patience, to pounce at last.

Peter's mind veered abruptly back to the scene before him. His subsconscious mind had telegraphed an imperious signal. He was not even aware of the wrench which summoned his attention, but Comstock faded from his thoughts as he found himself listening to the close of the medical testimony.

"My colleague and I both found, in completing our examination, that in addition to the wound causing death there were a number of bruises and lacerations in the nature of long scratches, on the arms of the deceased. There were seven of these marks on the right arm and four on the left. The internal organs were normal. That, I believe, is all."

"It's lucky for me the little old bean stayed on the job while I was napping." The words of the doctor had called to Peter with startling clearness after his mental wandering. "Now what did you mean by that?" he addressed the watchful mentor within him. "You told me all of a sudden to listen, and I listened. Gee whiz, I might just as easily have missed it. But

those scratches on the lady's arm signify something. Blast it, that's one more thing that's got to be fitted in."

"I had expected that it would be necessary to take very little more of you gentlemen's time," the coroner was saying. "There is just one more witness to be called, at the request of the chief of police. But since last night another volunteer witness has come forward. Mr. Joseph Rutters!"

An elderly farmer in working clothes stepped forward. His head was a bald pointed dome, and his face was given a curious forward thrust by the heavy walrus moustache which projected at right angles to his upper lip and curved downward almost to his chin. When he spoke this conspicuous hirsute adornment moved up and down with a seeming life of its own, as if it had attained to independent leadership and reduced the rest of his features to nonentity.

Out of respect to the occasion Mr. Rutters had removed his plug of chewing tobacco, but his jaws continued to work in a sidewise rotary motion, as if seeking the ghost of the vanished quid.

"I thought you gentlemen would want to know," he began without preamble, "that I passed Mr. Asbury on the road, six miles from town, at along about a quarter of ten last Tuesday night."

"What road was that?" the chief of police asked, startled out of his policy of silence.

"It was what they call the old Cumberville road that leads off into the hills from the main highway. My place is up that way, and I'd been to town to a picture show and was on my way home when I met Asbury's car."

Peter sensed an electric anxiety in Harris's manner. Whittlesey coughed to attract his attention, but the chief of police brushed the interruption aside with an impatient shake of the head. Here evidently was a development which he felt he must deal with personally.

"Did you stop and speak to him?" he asked challengingly.

"No, we didn't stop, either one of us, but I had to slow down to let him pass, and I saw as how it was Asbury's car all right."

"I assume, Mr. Rutters, that you always drive at a moderate rate of speed."

"Well, no. I go along faster than what you'd call moderate. I'm a pretty brisk driver."

"How fast?"

"Well, now, I drive close to twenty miles an hour in town and come up to thirty when I get on the highway."

For the first time since the beginning of the inquest a wave of restrained laughter rippled across the crowded room. Only two faces failed to respond to the old man's notion of breakneck speed. They were the faces of Harris and of Rutters himself.

"Did you speak to Asbury? Did he lean out? Did you get a good look at his face?" The chief of police fired his questions in rapid succession.

"Well, no. It was only a piece of a minute, you know. Asbury was driving fast and he didn't slow down —made me turn out for him. He didn't say nothing, but it was his car all right."

"It was quite dark at that time, of course?"

"Sure it was dark. Ain't I just said it was close on to a quarter to ten o'clock?"

"How do you fix the time?"

Rutter's moustache moved majestically up and down several times before he answered.

"I'd been to the first picture show, and then I come on out the highway toward home. I thought the show lasted a bit longer than usual, because when I got home I looked at my watch, and it was five minutes after ten o'clock. I looked at it two or three minutes after I got in, because I always wind and set the clock by it the last thing at night."

"What make of watch do you carry?" Whittlesey inquired sleepily.

"It ain't much of a watch—just a three-dollar one that I carry in my jeans. I don't say it's anything grand in the way of a watch, but it does me."

"You fix the time, then, by a cheap watch which you consulted some time after you arrived home?" Whittlesey's manner was still drowsy, but he had caught the implication of Harris's questions. For some reason, the chief of police considered this testimony highly damaging to Whittlesey's client.

"Well, it would take me close on to a quarter of an hour to get home. I looked at the clock, and it agreed with my watch all right."

"And how do you regulate the clock?"

"I set it by my watch," Rutters affirmed with finality.

This time even Harris smiled.

"You were driving along a dark road at night and a car passed you without slackening speed, at an hour which you did not note at the time. The man in the car did not speak to you nor lean out to give you a clear look at his face. You had left Medbury, also at an hour which you did not note, and you fix the time solely because some time after you got home you looked at a three-dollar timepiece which pointed to ten o'clock."

"Five minutes after ten, yes. That's what my watch said. And it was Asbury's car all right. It was blue."

"What shade of blue?"

"I can't rightly say."

"You have seen other blue cars, surely?" the chief of police could not resist breaking in.

"Was it light or dark blue?" Whittlesey was so deeply bored that his lips barely moved to frame the question.

"I don't know whether you'd call it light or dark. It was the kind of blue that Mr. Asbury's car is."

"Ah, yes, a blue car passed you at this undefined hour, but whether it was light or dark blue you cannot

say. There was a man in it, whose voice you did not hear and whose face you did not see."

"It all happened pretty quick, both of us going along like that." Rutter's moustache thrust itself still further forward with invincible determination. "But it was Asbury's car, and Asbury in it, all right."

The coroner was clearly out of his depth. He glanced inquiringly, first at Whittlesey, whose eyes were completely closed, and then at the chief of police.

"Any further questions, gentlemen?"

The chief of police shook his head.

Whittlesey puffed his thick lips in a breath that was almost a gentle snore.

"That's all," he sighed.

Peter joined the points of a star in a lopsided pentagon on his paper. He frowned at the diagram with intense concentration.

"Now, there's a perfectly good alibi for Asbury from a disinterested witness," he meditated. "I just wonder why they treated it like a snake that was going to bite."

## CHAPTER XXVIII

PETER leaned sidewise at an angle which threatened the immediate collapse of his balance, along with that of his chair and the table, and tapped Whittlesey lightly on the arm.

"The coroner spoke of having only one more witness. Aren't you going to put on Asbury?" he whispered.

"It won't be necessary." A twinkle sprang to life in the lawyer's sleepy eyes, like the gleam of fire behind heavy curtains. "Too bad for the papers, but you'll have to get along without him. Our case is so clear there's no need to put him on." Was it fancy, or did the heavy lids lift a fraction of an inch, revealing eyes that fixed upon Peter's with chill determination, insisting that he accept the explanation at its face value?

Peter's ingenuous gaze did not waver, but those

momentarily lifted lids put him on his guard. That look convinced him that it was not complete assurance in an obvious case which was keeping Asbury off the stand, but the fear that he might prove a hazardous witness in his own defence. He had told a story once and backed down from it, substituting another. A further change of mind to some incalculable third version would upset Whittlesey's entire plan.

"Who was the other witness the coroner spoke of, then?" Peter miraculously extended his hazardous position until only one leg of his chair teetered in contact with the floor, as he leaned close to the lawyer's shoulder.

"As a matter of fact, there'll be two. We'd intended to dispense with Mrs. Newell, but we've decided to use her."

"I'd forgotten all about her," Peter confessed with a rueful grin at his own stupidity. "What's her piece going to be?"

"You'll find that out in about two minutes. She preferred to stay outside, and one of the sheriff's men has been sent to call her now. That's what they're waiting for. But you can take it from me," again Whittlesey's eyelids lifted fleetingly," everything that's happened so far is just fluffy ruffles. All we needed to clinch this case is one man, and we've got him. Our last witness is Emil Kurtner."

Peter pursed his lips and checked, just in time, a whistle of astonishment. Emil Kurtner! He sank back in his chair, which rocked in a wild conflict with gravity for a moment, and then settled into place. Bleak desolation descended upon him. With dreary hopelessness he acknowledged that if Kurtner had decided on suicide, it had to be suicide. Kurtner did not guess—he *knew*. Who was Peter Piper to take issue with a man like Kurtner? It was possible that some of the jurors had never heard of the man who had begun his career as an engineer, had abandoned engineering in order to devote years to a brilliant research in pure chemistry,

and had finally turned a hobby for criminology into a specialty which had made the name of Kurtner in real life as famous as the name of Sherlock Holmes in fiction.

But whether they heard of him or not, they would know, before he got through, that Emil Kurtner dealt in the exacting terms of scientific demonstration. In that rigorous world there was no room for mere opinion. What Emil Kurtner said was so. However, Peter reflected with a faint gleam of comfort, he hadn't said it yet. There was no use crossing bridges, especially when this particular bridge was expected to come crashing down, plunging Peter into very chilly waters of disappointment.

Despite his discouragement Peter watched the advent of Mrs. Winifred Newell with revived curiosity.

"Oh Lord, for a camera man!" a reporter groaned from the opposite side of the table. "Here's a bit of class at last—the only good-looking dame in the whole works. These things really should be better managed."

Peter grinned appreciatively, but his attention did not swerve from the graceful figure advancing across the room to the coroner's table with the practised ease of one accustomed to being looked at, and sure that the glances, if masculine, would be favourable.

Winifred Newell was dressed for the occasion, and the costume did credit to her taste and judgment. Her small, close-fitting felt hat was tilted over one eyebrow; the flat feather ornament which nestled against her ear was the precise shade of the wave of light brown hair drawn forward into view. Eyes of darker brown matched the narrow bands of fur which trimmed her coat. Winnie Newell was a small-town stenographer, working for her living while angling for a divorce from a husband who worked in overalls, but from her alligator-skin shoes and bag to the sheen of her sheer silk stockings and her suede slip-on gloves, she was a convincing demonstration that Winifred Newell aimed at smartness and achieved it. She had

learned to look down upon cheapness with the religious abhorrence of the Puritan for sin. Where clothes were concerned she had the unassailable assurance of the devotee.

When her husband protested against bills for twenty-dollar shoes and four-dollar hose her wide brown eyes opened sorrowfully. Gus was not only unreasonable but wicked. Department-store clothing, to Winnie, was blasphemy against the gospel of the " exclusive " —and Winnie never blasphemed.

" But you can always tell bargain-counter stuff a block off—ugh!" Winnie's shoulders lifted in distaste.

" Suppose you can," Gus blundered on. " There's no disgrace in that. There's no disgrace in looking as if you wore what you can afford to wear. I do."

" Oh, you!" Winnie dismissed the entire male sex to heathendom, unworthy of the holy rites of shopping.

" Well, it's got to stop, I tell you! It will take me six months to pay off these bills, and meanwhile there'll be others piling up."

" I won't wear cheap-skate clothes for anybody," Winnie announced with calm righteousness. " I'm not going to look like a bargain basement shopgirl." If it had not been for her brief course in stenography, Winnie's highest hope of an occupation would have been behind a counter. But it was not the thought of being a shopgirl which aroused her magnificent scorn—it was the suggestion of looking like one.

" Well, I'm not going into debt for anybody—so that's that." There was a finality in Gus's tone which went beyond all his previous blusterings. Winnie realised with uncomprehending wonder that Gus had reached a point where she could no longer handle him. She had supposed that she could always " bring him round." It was a husband's manifest duty to pay his wife's bills. At least, it was somebody's duty to pay Winnie's bills. Her ambition for elegance was less a quest of admiration than a desire to bask in the sense of her own superiority to other women—women who

could endure underwear that was not real silk. But it had not occurred to her that Gus could reach a state where the spectacle of her self-adornment, however pleasant to the eye, was no longer worth paying for.

"Be yourself, Winnie," he urged with a note of helpless pleading in his voice, "I just can't keep this up, I tell you!"

"I am myself," Winnie flared. "Do you suppose I thought you'd ever care if I went out in a hat that shrieked four-ninety-five to the housetops? What is more, I'm going to keep on being myself." Her mouth straightened into an inexorable line under its curve of rouge.

"By heaven, I believe you'd sell soul and body for clothes!" Staring into Winnie's implacable brown eyes, Gus groaned the words almost with awe.

"I'm going to have decent clothes, if that's what you mean, and if you won't pay for them I expect I can find somebody that can!"

It was a threat born of anger, but even as she uttered it it took on the aspect of a distinct possibility. What was the use of good looks if they could not lift her above the ignominy of cheapness? Winnie's moral values were fixed upon material quality, and within its limitations her virtue was unassailable.

She drew an enamelled compact from her bag, studied her features in its mirror lid, withdrew the glass stopper from a tiny phial of Nuit de Nöel perfume, and touched a drop of scent behind each ear. Without another word she left the house, leaving Gus, dazed but unyielding, with both elbows planted stubbornly on the table. Gus had denied her gods, and she was not bending her knee to any alien deities.

Winnie's self-respect laid certain demands upon her. She was incapable of analysing that self-respect into self-adulation, and whatever needed to be done to meet those demands was not even a sacrifice. She did not set out with a definite idea of finding more worlds to conquer. Personal conquest was a minor matter, a

means to an end. Her intentions were vague, but they were expressed as clearly as possible in her words to Gus. If he could not pay for her someone else would have to.

She had gone to Asbury for employment in perfect confidence, and the confidence was justified. It was not the first time that Asbury had looked upon Winnie with an appreciative eye. Well, Asbury was doing a good business. After her divorce, who could tell? Anyway, he would do as a stopgap. Perhaps later she would go to the city and look around. But the last thing in the world she wanted was to set Gus fussing and fuming. The alimony that Gus could afford would not be much, but every little bit helped. She could not afford to lose out on the alimony—at least it would keep her going till she found something better. Gus had made a fearful scene when one of Asbury's express wagons had called for her trunk.

Winnie had not foreseen, when she became Asbury's stenographer, that she would ever get mixed up in a jam like this. It came just at the wrong time for everything. That nice chief of police had assured her that she should be kept out of it unless it was absolutely necessary to call her. It was a mess, all right, and heaven alone knew what use Gus would turn it to, if he wanted to fight the divorce. But as the lesser of two evils, it had to be faced.

Winnie kept the sheriff's messenger waiting for five minutes while she drew the wave of hair forward in just the right curve under the rim of her hat and thrust her face close to the small wall mirror in the undertaker's office to make sure that her delicately applied make-up was only just a shade too good to be non-existent. Then with serene confidence in an impeccable ensemble, she walked into the inquest room and surveyed the jury with the faintest and most appealing of smiles. She bowed and raised her hand to take the oath as if this were a novel way of acknowledging a social introduction.

Winnie had read numerous articles about the charm of a low, well-modulated voice. Except on state occasions, it often reverted to its natural shrillness. But Winnie was herself listening to every word that she spoke, and her self-consciousness had only the pleasing effect of a natural and modest hesitation.

"I am employed in Mr. Asbury's office," she began. "It is not unusual for me to come back after dinner to finish my work in the evening, and on such occasions Mr. Asbury is kind enough to come for me and take me home. Mr. Asbury called for me at half-past nine on Tuesday, September tenth, and from that hour until eleven o'clock I can vouch for his whereabouts, because he was at no time out of my presence!"

## CHAPTER XXIX

The room was breathlessly still. Winnie looked into the sympathetic eyes of the jurors with her faint, deprecating smile. Every face was turned to her with admiration as well as sympathy, saying as plainly as words: "Poor girl, what an ordeal she is going through to save him! She's a sweet, plucky little woman, if there ever was one."

If the faces of some of the women in the audience were more shrewdly calculating and aloof, Winnie ignored them. Her head drooped until the thick brown lashes of her eyes cast a delicate shadow downward, as she smoothed the fingers of her gloves. She was a brave, sweet little woman, mutely pleading for understanding from a world ever ready to assume the worst. Every juror old enough to have a grown daughter saw in her that possible daughter, innocent and rash, as girls were nowadays, begging them not to trample her underfoot. Every juror who did not have even a hypothetical daughter wondered if any of the girls he knew would do as much for him. Only the reporters at the press

table were cynically unimpressed. In fact, they viewed Winnie with something of triumphant glee.

"Whee whing, what a note! The lady offers up her reputation, if any, on the alter of romance," Evans of the *Express* murmured behind his hand to Peter.

"It's all right for you—you're on a morning paper." Peter growled. "All I ask is that she gets through with it by noon. I've got a one o'clock deadline."

"Did you know Mrs. Cole?" The coroner's manner as he asked the question paid unconscious deference to Winnie's subtly toned perfection. Five minutes after she was out of his sight the coroner could not have described what she wore, but the effect was not lost on him, nevertheless. Plenty of girls were pretty, but Winnie's ensemble demanded the consideration due to one who was delicately aloof, unsmirched by the harsh crassness of the crude, ordinary world. The coroner did not know that Winnie's aristocratic air had its price in dollars and cents plus an accurate eye for results. He merely responded to the suggestion that anyone who looked as exquisite as Winnie must be recognised as a lady and treated with appropriate gentleness, lest her sensibilities, more susceptible than those of common folk, be hurt.

"I knew her in a way—that is—" Winnie hesitated with a pretty air of striving to overcome her embarrassment in order to be helpful.

"Did you ever have any conversation with her?" Here was one witness, at least, whom the chief of police knew all about. She would not spring any surprises, and he could venture the question without fear of unexpected repercussions. Mrs. Newell would appear as a more disinterested witness if she were not interrogated by Whittlesey alone. The chief's manner was judicious, though kindly, as if his one desire was to help her to bring out the truth.

"Yes, once," Winnie answered with a grateful look. "I knew her by sight, but I did not suppose that she

knew me. However, she came up to me in the street and began talking to me."

"When and where was this?"

"It was a little over a week ago. As I have explained, I am employed by Mr. Asbury. One noon I mentioned that I would like to go down town to do a little shopping, and he suggested that I drive his car. It was not just as a favour to me—he had left a tyre to be repaired, and if I drove the car in I could stop and get the tyre on the way back. That was what I did. The tyre was not quite ready, and I was sitting outside in the car waiting for it when Mrs. Cole came up and spoke to me."

"Will you give me the substance of the conversation, please, as nearly as you can remember it?"

"She did not say anything at all at first. She walked up to the car and caressed and patted it. I asked her if she wanted anything, and she said 'Where's Roy?' I told her that I did not know just where Mr. Asbury was at the moment."

"'Then what are you doing in his car?' she asked.

"I did not like her manner, coming up and questioning me like that, but she seemed so agitated that I explained I had brought Mr. Asbury's car down town, at his request, to get a tyre. She kept looking up and down the street, as if she did not believe that Mr. Asbury was not there.

"'Isn't he with you?' she insisted. She came close then, and leaned over the edge of the door, peering into my face. I was a little bit frightened—there was something so fierce in the way she looked at me. I told her again that I did not know where Mr. Asbury was. I knew—everbody knew—that he had quarrelled with Mrs. Asbury, as we called her then, and left the ranch. I knew he would want to avoid her; but of course it was quite true that I did not know where he was, as it was the lunch hour.

"'Just who are you, anyway?' she said in that demanding way, as if she held me responsible for some-

thing, I don't know what. I did not know what else to do, so I gave her my name.

" ' Didn't he leave any word where he would be? Didn't he leave a message for me? Did he say he would need the car himself later?' The questions all tumbled out, one right after the other.

" I told her that so far as I knew there was no message, and that Mr. Asbury had not said anything about what he intended doing with the car.

" ' So he gives you that car to drive around in!' She was not talking loud, but I can't tell you how her voice sounded—so wild and bitter. Desperate, I guess you'd call it. ' It's my car, really. I bought and paid for it, and then gave it to him, like the fool I am. And *he's* mine, too. Just remember that, young lady.'

" She was so upset that it didn't seem worth while to argue with her. I could tell that she was in no state to believe a word I told her anyway. I'd have driven off and left her, only she was still leaning over the side of the door, so I couldn't do that very well. Fortunately, the man came out with the tyre just then, and she turned away, muttering: ' no message—no word for me. That's strange, very strange. He can't be as hard as that—he can't!' She had her handkerchief to her face, and I think she was crying."

Whittlesey uncrossed his elephantine legs and bent forward, his huge hands spread on his knees.

" You have said that Mrs. Cole at this time seemed wild, desperate, agitated. Did she impress you as a woman on the brink of despair—a woman in a mood in which she was ready to take her own life?"

" I—I don't know." A tiny conscientious frown drew Winnie's fawn-coloured eyebrows together. " You see, I've never known anybody who did that—killed themselves, I mean."

" Of course you haven't!" Whittlesey's voice was almost jovial. He was not really interested in her impression; it was the impression which he intended to convey to the jury that mattered, and that had gone

over very nicely. "Now, if you will just go back to the evening of Tuesday, when you say that you saw Mr. Asbury.

"I was working late, as I said. Mr. Asbury came back to his office at half-past nine and waited half an hour or so until I had finished making out some statements. Then we—we just sat and talked for a while." Winnie's brow was again serene.

"What were you talking about?" Mr. Crandall was palpably itching with eager curiosity.

"I don't remember everything. It was just chat. Mr. Asbury apologised for the way he looked. He said he wasn't in a very pretty state to take a lady home. The buttons were torn off the front of his shirt, and his collar was ripped from the band at one side. I asked what had happened and he said, 'Oh, the missus out at the ranch and myself have just been having another of our friendly arguments.' After what she had said to me in the car a few days before I couldn't help fearing that maybe she had said something about me, she had seemed so funny and suspicious. I couldn't think that she was quite right in the head. I finally got him to tell me that it was because he insisted on keeping his promise to escort me home that they had quarrelled."

"Was there any blood on the shirt?" Crandall was obviously delighted with his own astuteness, and hoped it would be rewarded by the admission that there *had* been blood.

"No, of course not." Winnie shivered with fastidious distaste. Her wide brown eyes turned to Crandall with a reproachful stare. She was in a trying, a painful position, but was it quite kind to suggest that she would have remained chatting with a man who came in with blood on his shirt? The other jurors, looking upon the immaculate Winnie, decided that such a suggestion was, to say the least of it, inconsiderate, and frowned their disapproval. But Crandal was not to be suppressed.

"How long were you there?' he insisted.

"Until sometime after ten o'clock."

"Why didn't you come forward with this information in the first place, before Mr. Asbury was arrested? You must have known that his whereabouts at that time were mighty important!" Crandall remonstrated.

## CHAPTER XXX

Oh, but—you see—" Winnie stammered, her head drooped even lower in appealing confusion—"it is all very simple, but I was afraid some people might not take it just the right way. I could not help thinking that it was my fault that Mr. Asbury had got into such a state. He didn't think it was right to let me go home from the office alone so late at night, and that was what Mrs. Cole had—had objected to. So I told him that if he would come up to my room I'd sew the buttons on for him and mend his collar. He had nobody to look after his things, and it seemed the least I could do when he had been to all that trouble to keep his promise.

"He came, and I fixed his shirt—it took me some little time to find buttons that would match. I live in a boarding house, and I don't like to start any gossip, so we were very quiet. I suppose everyone else in the house had gone to bed. Anyway, no one saw us, and Mr. Asbury left at five minutes of eleven. That—that's all." She lifted her eyes bravely to the men in the two front benches as she turned to go, and accepted with a smile of wistful gratitude the silent tribute in the faces of the jury.

"Thank you, Mrs. Newell." The coroner spoke with unwonted gentleness. Winnie was the first witness whom it had seemed appropriate, even necessary, to thank. He waited courteously until she had passed through the side door which the deputy sheriff gallantly held open for her, before turning back to sterner affairs.

" Since the expert testimony will probably take considerable time, the inquest will be adjourned until two o'clock this afternoon."

" I'm fair bursting with remarks." Barbara lifted a face flushed with eagerness as she hooked her arm through Peter's on the way back to the hotel. " Butter simply wouldn't melt in the fair Winifred's mouth, but I'll tell you one thing: she doesn't care two straws for Asbury. I don't think she means a great deal to him, either. Anyway, he kept right on chewing gum all the time she was talking."

" No-o?' Peter drawled with irritating scepticism. " Well, she did quite a lot to pull him through, considering that she's at outs with a suspicious husband, not to mention the construction ordinary gossip will put on her story."

" That girl worships just one object in the world, and that is herself," Barbara said with terse positiveness. " There's no warmth in her. I don't say she's deliberate about it, but I doubt if it ever has crossed her mind to do anything except for what she will get out of it. Did you notice the way she looked?"

" I noticed that she's very nice looking, if that's what you mean." It was one of the very nicest things about Barbara, Peter reflected, that you could remark on another woman's good looks without having her take the compliment as a slight upon herself.

" That's not what I mean at all!" Barbara stamped her foot in irritation. " I mean that her coat didn't cost a cent under a hundred and twenty-five dollars, and that she wore it as if she never would or could put on anything that cost less. If a stenographer dresses like that it's because she's picked on that expensive rightness as something real and important, something worth striving for and gloating over for its own sake. She's not using her clothes to get men, but if she had to, she'd use men to get her clothes. If she risked anything to tell about being with Asbury that night, she'd have to be paid for it in some way or other, because she doesn't know that

anybody ever does hard things for other people without pay."

"By jiminy, Barbara, there's a thought! For some reason or other Harris didn't want to use the alibi that old Rutters dropped into his lap. Rutters was evidently mistaken. He's none too bright, anyway. But why not let his story stand and leave it at that? He didn't want the jury to have the slightest lingering suspicion that Rutters might have been right about meeting Asbury on the road, so he had to make Mrs. Newell come through, even though she would rather have kept still. I suppose Asbury talked her into it. But I wonder why he didn't tell it himself in the first place?"

"Maybe she begged him not to."

"Well, I somehow don't see Asbury as the chivalrous type—not to the extent of risking his neck. But then, the risk hasn't been very great, with Harris protecting him and Whittlesey on the job. Hello, what's up?"

Jerry Dean, very much out of breath from running, came panting up to Peter and Barbara. The sweat trickled across his freckles, giving them the blurred look of polka dots that had run together in the wash. In his hand he waved a white envelope.

"I was waiting with Allison till the crowd got away, and missed you," he gasped. "Just as we came out Phil Akers' boy came up on his bicycle. He lives out of town a piece, on the ranch next to Comstock's, and Comstock went to him this morning and asked him to ride into town with this note for you. He said you'd be at the inquest and that it was important.'

"It's funny he'd send me a note when I'd just come from there." Peter took the envelope with a puzzled frown. "I hope——" He did not finish the sentence aloud. What he hoped was that Comstock had decided to disappear, and that he had not left Peter with the responsibility of knowing his whereabouts. He was almost tempted to leave the note unopened. But whatever it was that Comstock had been rash enough to con-

fide to him, he would have to know. Perhaps Comstock had recaptured the memory of those dazed hours of drunkenness. If this was a confession that he had killed Mrs. Cole—Lord, what a scoop for the *Herald!* If that were so, Peter could do nothing for him. He would have to watch the tragedy play itself out to its ghastly conclusion.

His first impression as his eyes leaped across the lines in neat, clerical handwriting was of dizzying uncomprehension. What in heaven's name was the old man talking about?

"I am going into the Asbury orchard [he read]. The trees are fine and healthy there, and I have always loved good trees. But I have loved my own trees, too. I don't want them to be neglected, even if they can't be mine any more, and if it happens here people might not want to buy the place. After what has already been, in the place across the road, I don't think it is unfair for me to go there. It surely won't make much difference—one more thing can't hurt, and in any event it is too fine a property for people to be squeamish about buying it."

The paper shook in Peter's fingers.

"He must have got drunk again!" But the words were unconvincing, even to himself. Something told Peter very clearly that the writer of those meticulous straight lines was looking clearly and soberly into some unimagined distance. He turned the page and read on.

"I am sending this message to you because I am sure you will do what you can to make it cause as little trouble to any one as possible. I have never had much out of life that I wanted, but I used to hope that if I kept on until I had saved up a bit I could have it at the end. It was a foolish thought. I am a failure, and it is too late now for me to imagine that I can be anything else. I might have thought it was my duty to face

it out. But I cannot go on living with the fear that my failure has made me the cause of my friend's death.

"If I knew that I had done it I would gladly take my punishment, knowing how futile and ridiculous a thing any punishment must be in return for such an act. But the not knowing is more than I can bear. You will find my body under the big apple tree. If you can have them say that it was due to financial worry I don't think Natalie would mind. She always wanted to help me, and she knew that I wished her well. Even if I killed her I hope she somehow knew that I didn't mean it. I am sorry to trouble you, but I believe you will do what you can, and I am very grateful.

"EDWARD COMSTOCK."

The sheet fluttered from Peter's nerveless fingers to the sidewalk. He stooped and fumblingly picked it up, handing it to Jerry.

"He's dead," he said huskily. Everything looked blurred and bright, as if seen through a mist. He blinked hastily several times to clear the mist away.

"There lies a man who loved his trees." Very few had ever heard Peter Piper speak in that tone of tender solemnity. He turned on Jerry fiercely, repudiating his lapse into sentiment with a fury which curved Barbara's lips to a loving, ironic smile.

"How the devil are we going to find out whether he did it when he's dead and didn't even know himself?" he challenged Dean with jeering ferocity. "This is one hell of a case. Im going to chuck the whole business and go home. I'm through."

"Peter, dear, maybe you didn't notice, but it's a quarter of one o'clock," Barbara reminded him gently.

"Jiminy crickets, so it is! Here, Jerry, you see Barbara to the hotel. I've got to run. It'll be just my luck to fight that long-distance connection till I miss the deadline, and if I do there'll be blue murder!"

## CHAPTER XXXI

By the instantaneous, potent influence of one man's personality, the churchlike interior, crammed with curiosity-driven spectators, was transformed on the afternoon of the second day of the inquest into a schoolroom. The jurors on the two front benches sat up a little straighter under the eye of Emil Kurtner as if he might at any moment tell the class to pay attention. In that assured pedantic presence even Crandall subsided into respectful meekness, mutely relinquishing any hope of being allowed to speak without permission.

Yet there was nothing overbearing in Kurtner's manner. He had no need to be impressive, and on the other hand he gave no sign of being himself impressed. Inquests were no treat to him. It was merely his business to explain a somewhat complex formula to his class in terms which they could understand, and lead the minds of the jury, step by step, to follow his demonstration. He eliminated every vestige of human wonder and horror from violence and death, as if he had dipped the scene into the bleaching vat of his mind and brought it out, robbed of all trace of colour. There was no place for emotional distraction in the neat development of the problem to its abstract and inexorable conclusion.

"Your name?"

"Emil Kurtner."

"Your occupation?"

"Consulting criminologist in the field of physics and chemistry."

The preliminary questions were the introduction of a lecturer rather than the administering of an ancient and solemn oath.

Kurtner settled himself in a chair beside the coroner's table, and addressed the jury in a slow, precise voice which dropped with a thump at the end of each sentence. Peter's lips widened in a grin as he indulged the

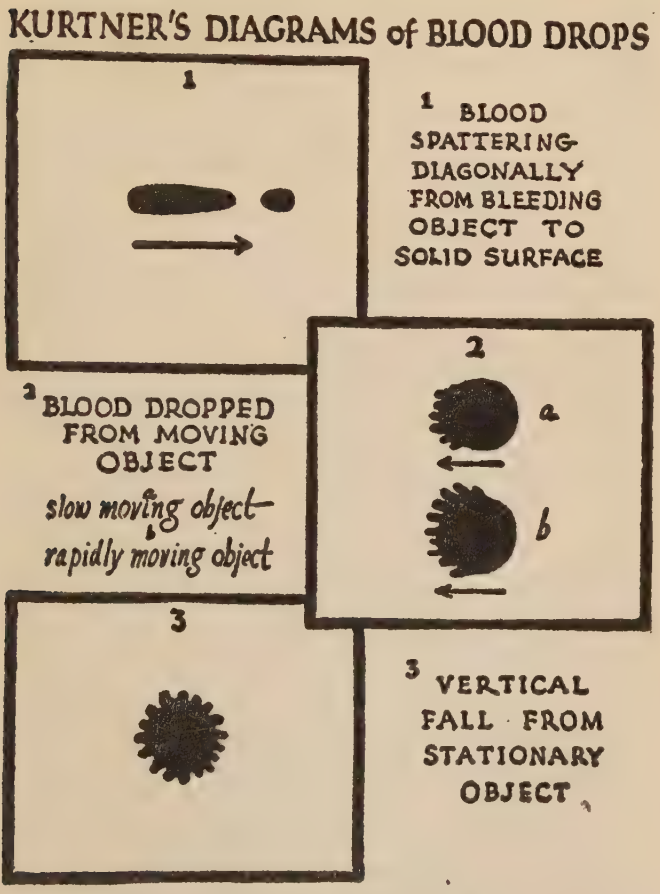
fancy that Kurtner tapped each sentence into place with the descending hammer stroke of his voice, fastening it down with a period. Not one of those clearly articulated sentences would have to be modified or shifted out of position in the structure he was building.

There was nothing arresting in Kurtner's physical appearance. His small, tight-lipped mouth would have relaxed in a smile at the notion of playing up to the part of a great man. But Peter caught a gleam of something symbolic in the sharp edges of his rimless glasses, with the thin gold arch crossing the thin, sharp bridge of his nose, and the narrow gold bows hooked over his ears. There was an efficient glitter about those polished lenses, triumphing over the weakness of human eyes with their mechanical perfection.

Kurtner's brain was like those lenses, sharpening the blurred outlines of a jumbled world until it took on the precise inevitability of a geometrical drawing. Peter wondered whimsically if by putting on Kurtner's glasses he would obtain a new vision, in which he would see Kurtner's world. The horn bows of Peter's own spectacles were always out of alignment—the left one tilted upward at an angle and lost itself in his hair, and the right one was split and broken at the end, so that it failed to reach the terminus of his ear, like the incomplete spur of an abandoned railroad. Barbara had never reformed him of the habit of wiping the lenses with his cotton handkerchief, so that they were seldom free from specks of lint as well as dust. And the world, to Peter, never looked in the least like a geometrical diagram.

Peter sighed gustily at the provoking imperfection and confusion of the world that Peter was constrained to see, and transferred his attention to the somewhat faded brown hair brushed very smoothly across Kurtner's head. His face showed the weathering of middle age. It was a colourless and yet not pale, like the seasoned wood of an unpainted house. But his hands were oddly, startlingly beautiful—slender but not bony, supple and delicately responsive. The small tapering fingers, with

a touch as sensitive as antennæ, twirled a pocket lens as he spoke.




"I first examined the room in which the body was found."

Peter took firm hold on his idly running mind and shifted it sternly into gear. It was his business to listen to Kurtner, not to spin fantasies about him.

" My object was to determine the position of the body at the time of wounding. The room was plentifully sprinkled with drops of blood, each of which by the form of its coagulation showed the direction from which it came. It was therefore possible by a co-ordination of points to arrive at the central point from which the blood had issued."

The faces of the jurors looked anxious, baffled, or indifferent to what was beyond their understanding, according to their degrees of intelligence. Kurtner paused, looked them over, and then, in the manner of a professor too just to blame his class for its stupidity, proceeded with careful lucidity.

" The point is an important one, so I will explain the method a little more in detail," he said, tapping the pocket lens lightly on the table. " Every drop of blood, no matter how small, even microscopic it may be, when it has passed through the air and settled on a solid object, takes a distinctive shape. It leaves the body as a liquid, like water, but the instant it comes in contact with the air it begins to congeal. Even within a foot or two, it has thickened enough to stick to the surface which it strikes. In this respect blood differs from every other substance, and this peculiarity enables us to fix the direction from which it came according to the way it splashes.

" For example, if the blood is flung diagonally the drops will take the shape of an exclamation point laid on its side, the direction of the flow invariably following the dot at the base." Kurtner laid down the lens, drew a pad of small white sheets of paper and a sharp-pointed pencil from his pocket, and with swift strokes illustrated his meaning. " The result in that case will be like this," he said, passing the slip to the end juror, who bent his head over the figure and handed it to his neighbour.

" If the blood issues from a person who is walking,

the falling drops will be roughly circular, but with a series of irregular craters on one side—the side toward which the object is moving. This broken side of the drop will be larger if the bleeding person is moving rapidly and more restricted in area if he is moving slowly." A second sheet of paper was torn from the pad and passed along the row of jurors, who gazed at it with the same awe-struck admiration they would have given to the sudden production of a white rabbit from a magician's hat.

" But if the bleeding person is standing still, so that the drops fall vertically, there will be no unbroken surface to the drop. The irregular projections will extend all the way round—like this." The jury accepted the third diagram. Some of them bent low over it, endeavouring to look wisely critical; others nodded respectful acquiescence, and still others handled the slip of paper gingerly, as if it were endowed with an independent magic power of its own.

" It is therefore evident," Kurtner stressed the point with a tap of the lens, " that if there has been shedding of blood it is possible to fix the position of the bleeding person or persons, and similarly to determine whether the blood issued from one person or more than one. It is merely necessary to pass a plane through the axis of the various drops, and follow the lines back to the point of intersection which will indicate their source."

Peter's eyes were beaming like lamps behind their spectacles. He had all but forgotten the purpose which had brought him there, in sheer intellectual joy. Involuntarily he waited for Kurtner to add, " Q.E.D." By Jove, there was something glorious in bringing the laws of physics to heel like that—something innately satisfying and triumphant, like a perfect phrase in music. It was all hocus-pocus to the jury. What did they know about passing a plane through an axis? But, by jiminy, it was neat.

" Now let us apply these principles to the room in which Mrs. Cole's body was found," the dry, academic

voice went on. "The position of the bleeding object is important, in this instance, as indicating the manner in which she met her death. Lines drawn in the direction from which the drops of blood had spattered on all four sides of the room converged at a point between the stove and the table. We therefore know that the body was not dragged there after death.

"The next step was to determine the height of Mrs. Cole's head at the time she was shot. Blood spots at the top of the stove showed that they were travelling upward at that level, but another spot, also on the stove but lower down, was proceeding in a directly horizontal direction. Another drop, travelling horizontally, struck the flap of the table about eighteen inches above the floor. It was also possible to draw an imaginary line around the wall at the point where the drops which had spurted upward and hit the wall in descending met those which were pointed upward.

"If Mrs. Cole was shot by an assailant, she would probably have been standing on her feet, with two possible alternatives—that she had been forced to her knees or thrown to the floor. None of these positions is in accord with the evidence. When the blood was released into the room by a shot fired through Mrs. Cole's head she was in a sitting position on the floor, with her back toward the stove, facing the west wall—facing, that is, the corner of the table. Such a conclusion is not a matter of opinion, but of scientific proof. Individuals may lie or be mistaken, but the laws of physics as exemplified in the blood drops admit of no mistakes, and they cannot lie."

## CHAPTER XXXII

PETER drew a deep breath. Doubtless the jury had not understood half of it. The laws of physics might be so much abracadabra to them, but if it had the aspect of black magic, it was potent magic. They might not

understand Kurtner, but they would believe him. And Peter, because of the intellectual honesty that was in him, was forced to believe also. He was not cowed, like the jury, by awe of the mysterious; he submitted, reluctantly but without evasion, to superior knowledge.

Kurtner did not deal in the uncertainties of psychology. Under the illumination of that sharp and shining brain the shadow of doubt could find no lurking place. From that time on Peter was convinced of one thing: that Mrs. Cole had indeed been sitting on the floor, precisely as Kurtner said she was. The faint tap of the lens on the table recalled him.

"My next move," Kurtner was saying, "was to determine the path of the bullet. On the corner of the stove door I found a dent about the size and shape of a half pea."

Peter turned an alert glance on the speaker. He remembered that dent.

"The shape of this dent, which was on a line with the elevation previously determined for Mrs. Cole's head, shows that the gun was placed horizontally with relation to the head—otherwise the course of the bullet would have been upward or downward. The bullet caromed from the stove, hit the wall, and was deflected in fragments to the floor of the pantry. I informed the officers that they would find the remains of the bullet there, and they told me that in their initial search of the room they had already done so."

Peter had an astute suspicion that Kurtner was not interested in what had actually happened, so much as in what *must* have happened. He was not content that the bullet had been found in a certain place—he wanted to prove that it must have been there and nowhere else. Kurtner eliminated accident from his cosmos as the atheist eliminates God. Facts were the product of scientific necessity. He followed the line of necessity, and there lay the fact. It had to be there, and it was.

"The trajectory of the gun itself was from the level of the table top to the door, which it struck in recoiling,

as was shown by the mark which it left on the door, and thence to the floor where it was found. I then examined the room for signs of a possible struggle. If there was such a struggle, at any rate, no blood was shed by a second person in the room. All of the blood drops focused upon the one spot eighteen inches above the floor between the stove and the table. There were several outlets to the room, but there were no indications that Mrs. Cole had tried to escape by any of them. The floor of the kitchen is covered with linoleum, and the marks left on the surface by the four legs of the table showed that it had not been pushed out of place.

" There are indications that Mrs. Cole was an exceedingly orderly person. For example, the small box by the stove was filled with bundles of newspapers, neatly rolled and stacked for starting the fire. The kindling in the woodbox was also laid in parallel rows. The chairs, one at each end of the table, were in their places —the slightly worn surface of the linoleum in this region shows where she and her daughter habitually sat for their meals.

" In the whole room there were only two misplaced objects—the stick of wood at the right of the central puddle of blood and somewhat above it, and the telephone receiver. The telephone instrument itself was in the centre of its stand. I may further mention that the space between the telephone stand and the table is a narrow one—not more than eighteen inches.

" It is therefore extremely unlikely that Mrs. Cole could have been pursued through that narrow opening without displacement of the furniture. The replacement of the telephone on its stand must have been a deliberate act. If she had seized the telephone to summon aid she would have flung the instrument from her instead of putting it, with her usual meticulous care, in the centre of the stand."

Peter's memory harked back, with almost intolerable vividness, to the room as he had seen it. Every word of Kurtner's lucid description was correct. He had left out

nothing except—except the something that made of the room an abode of terror and rending pain and death. Kurtner did not think of Mrs. Cole as a passionate, desperate woman whose life blood spurted horribly upon those walls. She was a factor in an equation. Her reality was the abstract reality of an element in a formula, and in that formula the personal, the unpredictable, had no meaning.

Facts had no meaning of their own; they were merely the Q.E.D. at the end of a flawless chain of reasoning. And the reasoning was flawless because it depended on laws independent of the human mind that used them. Each item in that reasoning was nailed into its exact place by the downward hammer stroke of Kurtner's voice; and at the end lay the fact, which was there because it was logically bound to be there.

Peter wondered what Kurtner would do if one of his facts declined to be reasonable, refused to lie inertly in its place and be caught. But revolt would be futile. There was no eluding those straight lines of rationality, drawing to the point where the fact had to be. You might as well talk about a revolt of the triangle against Euclid. But wasn't there such a thing as non-Euclidean geometry, a monstrous defiance hurled against the mathematical decree that parallel lines never meet? Hang it, how did he ever get wandering off on that? Couldn't he even listen sensibly? Peter broke the point of his pencil in the violence of his resolve to pay strict attention.

" The body had already been removed to the morgue, and I examined it there." Delicately as petals, the smooth, tapering fingers curved about the lens on the table. " A gun held close to the flesh will split the skin in a particular manner which was not evidenced on this occasion. The eyebrows and eyelashes were singed equally on both sides of the face. I reached the tentative conclusion—tentative, because I am not a medical expert—that the damage was done by an explosion of gases from within outward, from the muzzle of a gun

held in the woman's mouth, and that the backfire singed her eyebrows and lashes.

" There is just one more point to be noted. In addition to the hairs caught in the sight of the gun, I also discovered a number of hairs clutched in the dead woman's hand. These hairs were not pulled from the head by the roots, but were cut across, as were other traces of hair found in the blood drops on the walls."

The jury looked up with revived interest. All this talk about trajectories was a bit beyond them. They'd take the professor's word for it without surprise or enthusiasm. But these hairs, now, were a real clue. Did Kurtner have a way of telling whose hairs they were? This science was wonderful stuff, if you knew your way about in it.

" The hairs clasped in Mrs. Cole's hand were similar in colour and general appearance to the hair of Mr. Asbury, specimens of which I obtained for purposes of comparison."

The juror in the second row, who held his hand cupped to his ear, nudged his neighbour.

" There, now! I always did think that young squirt was mixed up in it," he announced in a piercing whisper.

Crandall turned and glared a rebuke over his shoulder. But Kurtner ignored the interruption. His voice travelled steadily on, like a smoothly running machine.

" When I examined the hairs under the microscope, however, I found that they bore only a superficial resemblance to those of Asbury. The cell structure demonstrates with absolute certainty that they are not his, while a further comparison with hairs which I took from Mrs. Cole's own head shows that the two are identical, as they are also identical with the hairs blown from her head by the explosion of the bullet and found among the bloodstains on the walls of the kitchen, and with the hairs caught in the gun."

" Well, how do you figure they got there? Did she pull out some of her hair before the shot?" Crandall

had resisted the impulse to speak until he was fidgeting with the effort of restraint, and his words came out now with the popping force of balls hurled from the end of a Roman candle.

"I have already said that the hairs in Mrs. Cole's hand were not torn out at all. The explanation of their presence is simple. They, like the hairs on the wall, were blown off by the explosion when the gun was fired into her head. They blew across her hand when she fell, and as rigor mortis set in her fingers automatically closed over them. The same thing is true of the hairs on the gun. They were not torn out by becoming entangled in the sight, as they might have been if the gun had been held against the side of her head. They also were cut, not torn."

Kurtner leaned down and lifted the brief case which stood tilted against the side of his chair. From it he extracted a bundle of small photographic plates.

"I have here, magnified by a hundred diameters, micro-photographs of the hairs in question. They are marked A, B, C, D, and E. On plate A are the hairs found in Mrs. Cole's hand; B is a hair blown against the wall by the force of the shot; C is a hair taken from Mrs. Cole's head after her death, D is one of the hairs found on the gun, and E is a hair from the head of Asbury. You will see at once that A, B, C, and D are of identical structure, while E is of an altogether different formation."

The plates were circulated among the jurors, and the reporters at the press table with one accord craned forward to view them as they passed along the line. Peter caught a glimpse of dark objects against a gray background, looking for all the world like dead twigs. Crandall solemnly turned each square of glass on all four sides in turn, as if it might be more intelligible if held upside down. Peter choked on an hysterical impulse to laugh. They were exactly like the jurors in *Alice in Wonderland* who held their slates upside down and wrote

" Important—unimportant " with pompous impartiality.

" From the position of the body when wounded, the trajectory of the bullet and the recoiling gun, the nature of the wound, the absence of any sign of struggle in the room, and the total lack of evidence of the presence of a second person, it is evident that Mrs. Cole put in her telephone call, replaced the instrument with her customary orderly precision, and sat down on the floor, where her mouth would be level with the muzzle of the gun laid across the corner of the table. The stick from the wood-box, with which she reached forward and pushed the trigger, was thrown out of her hand and backward over her head as she fell. The shot was fired through the mouth and was self-inflicted." Kurtner's voice dropped with a thud as he drove the last nail into his logical structure, a structure which left no crevice for the winds of chance to enter. As if to mark his final Q.E.D. he lifted the pocket lens and dropped it into his waistcoat pocket.

" This completes the testimony to be brought before you——" the coroner began. But the sentence remained unfinished.

A heavy, thick-set figure, topped by a florid face, arose from the second row on the opposite side of the room and pushed its way into the aisle.

" Just a moment, Mr. Coroner. I am Mrs. Cole's son-in-law and represent the interests of the Cole family in this case. Mrs. Cole's family have hired a criminologist of their own, whose expert testimony, I have reason to believe, is not in agreement with that of Mr. Kurtner. The jury is entitled to hear that testimony!"

## CHAPTER XXXIII

The chief of police rose and faced the intruder. He was no longer the artful politician, but the brusque policeman. He confronted Lawrence with the unswerv-

ing, narrow-lidded stare of one whose authority gives him unchallenged right to bully any one rash enough to oppose him.

"It is unnecessary to call another expert. Mr. Kurtner has a national reputation, and his integrity and ability are beyond question. He has been brought here at great expense——"

"It was you who hired him, I believe?" Lawrence's eyes were as unflinching as Harris's own. He interrupted the chief of police with contemptuous arrogance. John Lawrence was not a helpless culprit, cringing with dread before the power of the police. He wielded a power of his own, the power of wealth—a power that had given to him also the unchallenged right to bully any one rash enough to oppose him.

Harris leaned forward, resting both hands on the table before him.

"The state, by the authority vested in me, employed Mr. Kurtner to investigate this case. You had the privilege of hiring him yourself, if you wanted to."

"I did attempt to get in touch with Mr. Kurtner, but I found that you were ahead of me."

"As an agent of the people, Mr. Kurtner is entirely impartial——"

"You just said yourself that the family of Mrs. Cole had the right to hire a private investigator if they were dissatisfied with the work of the police. They *are* dissatisfied, very much so; and when they found that you had blocked them of securing the services of Kurtner they employed Mr. Chester Mason," Lawrence again interrupted. "I demand that he shall be heard."

He turned pointedly away from the chief of police, and glared with inimical, bloodshot eyes at Asbury. Asbury answered the look with impudent defiance. He lounged in his seat, his hands thrust into the pockets of his torn sweater, and continued to chew gum with insulting ostentation.

Whittlesey had been trying in vain to attract the attention of either the coroner or the chief of police.

Harris was roused to the pitch of battle, and the coroner looked on with the helplessness of a spectator at a dog fight. Whittlesey leaned his head back until the triple folds of his chin were smoothed into a single sloping expanse. His eyes, empty of expression, sought the ceiling.

" As Mr. Asbury's counsel, I appreciate to the full the great weight which Mr. Kurtner's unbiased testimony will undoubtedly have with the jury. But my client is quite willing that the jury should hear whatever this—this Mr. Mason may have to say."

Whittlesey's indifferent tones betrayed no hint of his burning desire to take Harris by the scruff of the neck and drop him somewhere. Despite his intentional hesitation, the name of Mason was familiar to him. The pause had been for the purpose of impressing the jury with the obscurity of Mason as contrasted with the fame of Kurtner. Lawrence himself had played into his hands there, when he showed his chagrin at finding that he had been forestalled in his attempt to employ Kurtner for himself.

Whittlesey's eyes followed the progress of a fly, crawling, a minute speck, upside down across the ceiling. He sighed, as he had often sighed before, with wonder at the lack of subtlety in his fellow men. Harris was a fool not to see that to pit Mason against Kurtner could only result in Mason's ignominy, and twice a fool not to see that to refuse to hear Mason's testimony would raise a doubt in the minds of the jury. The conviction implanted by Kurtner would be clouded by the suspicion that his opinion might not stand before assault. Whittlesey wearily closed his eyes upon the stupendous folly of declining a combat against an antagonist so feeble that you were sure of triumph.

" I still do not see the point of taking up more of the jury's time," Harris said. " Asbury has been held on suspicion by the police, on the bare possibility that evidence might be brought forward connecting him with Mrs. Cole's death. That evidence has not been forth-

coming, and Kurtner, who is an absolutely disinterested witness, has shown beyond a shadow of doubt that Mrs. Cole took her own life. It is as much the duty of the police to protect Mr. Asbury from unjust persecution as to hold him so long as there was any suspicion of his guilt. However, since Asbury's own counsel has asked that a point be stretched out of courtesy to the feelings of Mrs. Cole's family, naturally there is nothing more to say."

The chief of police rather huffily subsided into his chair. It was plain that he resented having to yield a point to Lawrence. But Whittlesey, when he accepted Harris's large cheque at a very private interview, had insisted on absolute control of the case.

With obvious relief at the cessation of hostilities, the coroner called the name of Mr. Chester Mason.

Mason bustled forward. He was a small, angular man, with so marked a resemblance to a magnified cricket that one expected to hear him chirp. However, his voice was as rotund and oratorical as he himself was thin and wiry. Although he faced the jury, his real attention was focused balefully on Kurtner, who had quietly resumed his seat. For years Mason had been a prey to a single ambition—to be recognised as a rival of the great Kurtner. He never missed a chance to appear in opposition to the criminologist who ignored him with an indifference far more rankling than outspoken contempt.

That he had been worsted in these encounters only increased his rancour. His one object was to pierce Kurtner's impervious armour. Mason cared nothing for being right if only he could once prove Kurtner wrong, for he hated the man with a venomous and yet oddly impersonal hatred of the Olympian heights where Kurtner maintained his chill detachment.

"I am unable to agree with all the theories advanced by my learned colleague," he began. He would show the jury from the start that he and Kurtner were on the same level. "I have not had the advantage of the

co-operation which has been granted my academic friend, but, handicapped as I have been, I have still noted a few points which he seems to have overlooked. His reconstruction of Mrs. Cole's death was clever—very clever. But there are certain factors which it fails to explain—which, in fact, contradict his conclusion."

There was a restless stirring, a shuffling of feet from the jury benches. They were looking forward to a trip to the ranch as a reward for their patience. Would they have to sit there and listen to a lot more about passing planes through an axis, calculating trajectories, and other highbrow stuff? Their enthusiasm for experts was decidedly dull. But Mason was moved by the sheer contrariness aroused in him by any statement from Kurtner. So long as he could contradict Kurtner with any show of plausibility, satisfaction welled up within him.

This was a duel between them. The jury, the real facts behind Mrs. Cole's death, even the orders of his client, who had said, " Get what you can on Asbury. I'm sure there's some thing to be got. They're covering him up somehow," were subsidiary to that one devouring ambition to triumph over the man who would not even admit that they were rivals. Kurtner's slight wince at the word " colleague " had not gone unperceived.

" The stick found above Mrs. Cole's right hand," Mason said in his most authoritative tones, " could not have been used by her to push the trigger. The reflex action of her muscles would not have thrown it four feet away, in time for it to be spattered by the shower of descending blood. Moreover, Mrs. Cole was a very small woman, barely five feet in height. No measurements have been taken to show that it was physically possible for her short arm to reach the trigger with the aid of the stick."

" That isn't proof—it's just statement," Peter muttered crossly. "How does he know all that about the force of reflex muscular action? Why didn't he make

the measurements himself, if he thinks she couldn't reach it?"

Peter was feeling battered by the violent bumps of conflicting reactions. Kurtner's abstract intellect took no account of accident or irrationality. Peter doubted if reality was quite as subservient to human calculation as all that. If you refused to accept an element of the perverse, the unpredictable, you might miss the core of it. But Kurtner would never have argued about the reflex action of a dead woman's arm. If he had thought the point needed to be taken up he would have known the law of force and matter governing that outflung arm, and would have presented it to the jury in terms of physics. The jury would doubtless have been unable to read his mathematical formula after they got it—but it would be unassailably correct.

Mason's voice rolled steadily on. His air of superb conviction carried a glow of comfortable assurance to the jury. Any one who spoke so emphatically must know what he was talking about. The men on the benches, no longer impatient, settled back to listen.

"As a result of my examination of the hairs found clasped in Mrs. Cole's hand, and of those caught in the sight of the gun when her assailant pressed the muzzle against the side of her head, I have prepared a set of micro-photographic plates of my own, magnified three hundred diametres. These plates were prepared with the utmost care, under strict laboratory conditions. One of the physicians has already testified to his belief that Mrs. Cole was shot from the side of the head. There is not entire agreement on this point, but it is patent that if she committed suicide by reaching forward with the stick to the trigger of the gun, she would hardly have twisted herself sidewise in order to place the muzzle against the side of her head.

"I cannot agree with any finespun theory that all these hairs were blown into such significant positions by the explosion. If, on the other hand, Mrs. Cole was the victim of an attack in which the murderer jammed the

gun against her head, what would be more natural than that some of her hair should have caught in the forward sights? This deduction is further reinforced by a conclusion of the greatest importance. My photographs show that the hairs clutched in Mrs. Cole's hand are not her own!''

## CHAPTER XXXIV

An audible sigh, the simultaneous release of many pent breaths, swept across the crowded room. It was a sigh partly of astonishment at the daring of Mason's stark contradiction of Kurtner, partly of sheer excitement. The jurors unconsciously straightened their backs against the hard benches. They were caught in the tension of a hidden struggle. They did not comprehend the full meaning of Mason's attack, but they sensed its significance. Their verdict would not be a mere formal declaration of the cause of Mrs. Cole's death. Their decision would choose the winner in a conflict whose causes remained obscure, but whose import was clear. It was Mason against Kurtner, and Mason had flung the gauntlet.

Kurtner alone was unmoved. He had slipped into the seat reserved for him next the aisle, and he sat there with the passive attention to his surroundings of a man condemned to wait in a railway station for a delayed train. His slender, pointed fingers were engaged in tightening the straps of the brief case tilted on his knees. He did not look up, and the antennæ-like fingers neither paused nor hastened in their movements. The straps adjusted to his liking, he surveyed the wall in front of him with serene detachment.

Mason raised his voice, as if to force Kurtner to listen. Did the man think he was infallible, that nobody but himself was worth hearing? He'd give the jurors, anyway, the idea that Emil Kurtner was not God. There were others in the field, others just as well worth

listening to, maybe better. It was a pose of Kurtner's —a pose that had pulled the wool over every one's eyes. They fought over Kurtner, trying to get him first, and then if he declined the case, they turned to Chester Mason as a left-over, or because they were too poor to pay Kurtner's stupendous prices.

But it was not the money that mattered. It was Kurtner's air of saying what he had to say, and then not caring whether his findings were upheld or rejected —his air that a layman's opinion was of no importance. He did not care about winning cases, he used none of the tricks for impressing juries; and yet he did win them, and the juries were impressed. And he put Mason in the same class with laymen. He would not acknowledge that they were competitors. But the time would come when Mason would reach Kurtner's inaccessible self-esteem and prick him. Perhaps the time had come even now.

" With some difficulty, I finally succeeded in obtaining a specimen of Asbury's hair." Mason's tone was dignified yet aggrieved, conveying with great distinctness the impression that he had not been given fair treatment against Kurtner. " I asked for a specimen of live hair, such as my colleague had no difficulty in obtaining, but the best I could do was to be allowed some hair from Asbury's brushes. Under the microscope live hair presents a distinct difference from the dead hair of the same person, so that conditions for comparison were far from perfect. However, gentlemen, I will call your attention to certain points."

The deferentially inserted " gentlemen " warmed the jury. At last they were being treated, not as rather stupid schoolboys, but with the respect due their position. Kurtner might hand out big words to them, but it lay with them to decide whether to approve or condemn him.

" Mrs. Cole's hair is dry, well cared for, and frequently shampooed. The hairs found in her hand, on the contrary, were oily, with traces of soot and dust,

and had not been washed for many weeks. The hairs taken from Asbury's brushes showed the same condition, and the colour is the same. It is impossible to say conclusively that Mrs. Cole was actually clutching hairs torn from Asbury's head in a scuffle between them; for, as I have explained, I was not permitted to make a definite test. But I am personally positive that the hair in her fingers resembles Asbury's more nearly than it does her own."

With an impish gleam behind his spectacles, Peter noted that for the first time Asbury's jaws had ceased working. His face flushed angrily and his lips tightened to the snarl of the fighter. One hand unconsciously lifted toward his sleekly brushed hair and then fell in a clenched fist on his knee.

"That got him!" Peter reflected with amusement. "He resents those uncomplimentary remarks about his personal appearance far more than the suspicion of murder. He'd like nothing better than to prove that he washes his hair by giving Mason a swat on the jaw. And that dumb jury, pawing over those plates, thinks that because Mason's are larger and there are more of them, they must be better than Kurtner's. They can't tell which ones are correct. I couldn't, either," Peter admitted honestly, "unless I sat down with both sets at once and studied them for an hour or two. They're just so many crooked sticks to me."

Mason paused respectfully until Crandall collected the plates and passed them back to the coroner's table.

"I also examined the ranch house," he proceeded, "and I found there no evidence of a premonition of disaster. Everything in the house was precisely as usual, indicating that Mrs. Cole had gone down to the kitchen for a short time, intending to return. Mrs. Cole's body showed ample evidence of a struggle, in the bruises and scratches on her arms. Asbury, whose published statement that he quarrelled with Mrs. Cole early on Tuesday evening has not been denied, would doubtless account for them as marks of his chivalrous

treatment in that earlier encounter. But Asbury also said that Mrs Cole followed him out to the car, and I found no marks of dust or earth on Mrs. Cole's black satin slippers, although the road was very dusty."

"Hm," Peter hummed under his breath, "but she might have wiped them off—or she might not even have been wearing them when Asbury called. I wonder if they'll think of that?"

"We have the testimony of Mrs. Newell," Mason continued, "that there was no blood on Asbury's shirt. Asbury's absence from the ranch at the hour of Mrs. Cole's death rests on the statement of Mrs. Newell. Of course, Mrs. Newell did not know that the precise time of his visit was destined to be a matter of grave importance. She might easily have been mistaken in her recollection of the time—especially as her relations with Asbury were admittedly of a very friendly nature."

Whittlesey suddenly opened his eyes.

"Do I understand that you are attempting to impeach Mrs. Newell as a witness?" he inquired, heaving a gentle sigh. "If so, no foundation has been laid."

Mason whirled upon the source of this intrusion.

"Not at all," he said, his mellow tones sharpened to indignation. "And I believe that an expert witness is entitled to proceed without interruption. As I was saying, gentlemen, granting that there was actually no blood on Asbury's shirt, I am personally very much impressed with the fact that, though blood was very generally distributed on the walls and ceiling, there is very little blood on the side of the room next the window. If Asbury stood directly in front of Mrs. Cole when the shot was fired, his clothing might not have received any of the blood. Of course, I cannot say positively that Asbury was there, but I am personally convinced that he could have been there."

Peter's glance swerved to Crandall. The face of the indefatigable junior was screwed into a twisted frown, a sure sign that enforced silence had begun to wear on him. He'd be breaking out in a minute. When he did,

his insignificant frame to an impressiveness that would voice had not been wasted.

" Do I understand that you think it likely Asbury could have fired the shot and not have got blood on him?" he asked with a new humility.

" I wouldn't go so far as to say that it is likely. But it is distinctly possible. In my long experience I have known many more improbable things to happen. There is just one more point, the mark on the door where it was struck by the gun. My colleague's statement that the mark was made in the recoil of the gun from the table is sheer supposition. The gun might have been flung away by the assailant and have struck the door in falling, or it might have been knocked against the door in the course of the scuffle."

" Good Lord," Peter groaned inwardly, " he talks about supposition!"

" And yet, for all that, Mason might be right. Logic was all on the side of Kurtner—but was it always the logical thing that happened? Bound by the iron restrictions of probability, might not Kurtner have shut himself away from the irrational, improbable truth? Perhaps truth was on the side of chaos, eluding the sure steps of the mind, to be stumbled on unawares.

Mason thrust out his chest, endeavouring to expand his insignificant frame to an impressiveness that would match his sonorous tones.

" I do not say that Mrs. Cole's death was a deliberate and premeditated murder. But it is my conclusion, based, I may say, upon a vast array of successful experiences in the investigation of crime, that suicide was physically impossible. In my opinion, Mrs. Cole met her death as the result of a terrific battle in which Asbury figured, and the gun was discharged in the mêlée." He glanced challengingly at Kurtner, hoping for a sign of discomposure at the thrusts against what Mason termed " finespun theories." But Kurtner, hugging his brief case, was gazing into space, apparently unaware of Mason's existence.

Peter glanced at his watch. Three-twenty-five—and the final deadline was three-thirty. He could just make it! He flung a backward grin over his shoulder to the reporters from the morning papers who shared the press table, and had covered half the distance to the door with long, loping strides before Mason turned away from the group at the coroner's table.

## CHAPTER XXXV

Peter had no breath for whistling as he thrust his way through the crowd clustered about the door and ran full tilt down the empty, drowsing street in search of a telephone. But his thoughts were chanting to the inner rhythm of his own peculiar hymn of battle.

Mason—Kurtner. Mason was clearly inflated with the wind of self-importance. He was accompanied by an invisible orchestra blowing fanfares to his own glory. Perhaps his blatancy was an unconscious protest against his appearance of a magnified insect. What was the fable about the frog who burst in trying to make himself as big as an ox? Organic defect—inferiority complex—old Æsop writing the most modern psychology 2500 years ago. Yet there was danger in rating Mason too low because he rated himself too high. He was bombastic, and yet not a charlatan. He would strive to make facts tell the story he wanted them to tell—believe first and prove afterward. There was a line in the trial scene in *Alice in Wonderland*—" Verdict first, evidence afterward "—that was it. But it wasn't so absurd, at that. A good deal of the world's thinking followed the same procedure.

Only, what was Mason's interest in the matter? He had been hired by Lawrence. But why was Lawrence so anxious to oppose a suicide verdict? From the family's point of view that would be the easiest way of hushing up a painful scandal. Peter had intercepted Lawrence's steady glare of implacable hate at Asbury.

From appearances, Lawrence was far more likely to do his utmost to fasten the crime on Asbury than Mrs. Cole had been, supposing that she had tried to accuse her lover before ending her own life. When Mason insisted on the theory that Asbury killed Mrs. Cole in a quarrel was he merely selling his testimony at a price? That would make him out a common crook; for, after all, the man was an expert witness. No, he might believe what he wanted to believe, but he did believe it.

Peter strove to recall what he had read, or heard, about Mason. His name had appeared in a number of cases—always on the opposite side to Kurtner. There was a note of malice in some of his quoted statements. Did he actually think that he could discredit Kurtner? Well, that would be a job! Peter remembered a conversation with a superior court judge who had formerly been a famous criminal lawyer. Kurtner's name had been mentioned, and the judge had said: "A dangerous man—hard to beat. I always feel sorry for the side that lets the other side get him. There's just one thing about him: he could not bear to admit that he was wrong. But then, he never is wrong."

Peter dashed into a small print shop and pantingly commandeered the proprietor's telephone.

"Long distance, and make it snappy. Reverse the charges. Good heavens, do you want my birth certificate? This is Peter Piper of the *Herald* calling the *Herald* office. Marion? Catch Jimmy for me, and step on it. A peach of a note, Jimmy! New lead on Cole. Yes, I know we're on the deadline, but this is worth holding the presses for. Battle of experts. Supersleuths scratch each other's eyes out. Kurtner plumps for suicide. Chester Mason, criminologist employed by John Lawrence, son-in-law of Mrs. Cole, says Asbury bumped her off in a fracas.

"And say, about those hairs—get this. Hairs! H for hell, A for asinine, I for itch, R for red. Yes, I said hair—the kind that's on your head. Kurtner and Mason each handed out a set of photographs. Kurtner's

prove that Mrs. Cole had her own hair in her hand, and Mason's prove it was somebody else's, probably Asbury's. It's a cinch somebody's camera lied, or else they count on the jury being too dumb to know the difference. I couldn't tell, myself, for that matter. And say, if it had happened five minutes later, the morning papers would have got it before us. Sure, and the saints in hivven were watching over the dear little *Herald* that time."

Peter slammed the receiver on the hook and turned to find the proprietor of the print shop at his elbow, where he had stood listening with ecstatic concentration.

"Well, I never knew before that that's the way they get news in the papers! It all comes out so different when its printed."

"It has to come out a little different, sometimes, or it wouldn't be printable," Peter answered with a grin. "Here, buy yourself a cigar on the *Herald*," he added, placing a quarter on the counter.

But the proprietor thrust the coin away.

"Thanks just the same, but there's no charge. Maybe in the city folks think nothing about taking money whenever it's offered, but I never could like the feel of it, myself," he said with unconscious dignity. And then, as if he feared that his refusal of the tip might give offence, he added: "Come in again whenever you want to 'phone. I hope you didn't mind my listening. It was mighty interesting, finding out what news sounds like before it's written up."

As Peter retraced his steps along the street he marvelled anew at the ways of Medbury.

"We call them hicks," he mused, "but, by jiminy, it takes a hick to feel in his bones that there's something bad for self-respect in taking a tip. I was a crass fool, insulting the pride of a gentleman behind the counter of a poor little hole-in-the-corner shop. And he was so much a hick that he was afraid of hurting my feelings in showing me up. Hereafter when I call a man a hick

it's going to be in the nature of a pretty high compliment."

The sound of voices raised in altercation at the front of the inquest room set Peter to pushing his way ruthlessly through the crowd gathered about the door, like a swimmer breasting an adverse tide. He disregarded murmurs of protest and fought his way through a forest of prodding elbows. As he strode up the aisle an outthrust arm barred his progress, holding a sheet of paper. Jerry, seated next the wall out of reach, signalled with frantic grimaces.

Peter nodded his thanks. Good egg! Jerry had noticed his departure and had "covered" for him during his absence. Absorbed as he was in Allison, the boy could nevertheless be depended on to hold up his end.

"John Lawrence raising H. Wants to cross-examine Kurtner. That's all so far."

Peter had read and pocketed the message before he reached the press table and grabbed for a pencil.

Lawrence was again on his feet, steadying himself with a hand on the back of the bench. He clung to the bench, as if without its aid he would be swept forward to catapult himself bodily upon the chief of police. He was making an obvious effort to keep his voice under control as he sought to batter down Harris's resistance.

"Asbury's attorney has cross-examined every witness. I have brought down with me an attorney authorised to represent the Cole family. I fail to see why he should not have the privilege of cross-examining Mr. Kurtner on his deductions, since that privilege has been so freely exercised by Mr. Asbury's counsel. It seems to me that this inquest has been pretty largely conducted for the benefit of the man who is held under suspicion of Mrs. Cole's murder."

"That's enough!" Harris roared, smiting the flimsy card table with his fist so violently that the papers on it leaped into the air and slid to the floor. "If you

don't look out you'll be under arrest yourself for interfering with the police!"

"It might be explained to Mr. Lawrence," Whittlesey said mildly, "that it is precisely the fact of Mr. Asbury's arrest on suspicion of murder which gives him the right to legal representation." He ignored the tension that held the two men, the invisible current of anger that flashed between them, and addressed Lawrence with gentle courtesy. His manner was that of an adult being patiently reasonable with an overwrought child. "If the authorities responsible for my client's arrest have themselves become convinced of his innocence by the evidence presented, that is certainly not to their discredit nor to that of my client. Though it is of course natural for the family of the deceased to be deeply distressed, they have no reason to resent such an outcome, since they, and all of us, are seeking, not a scapegoat, but the simple truth."

Lawrence turned upon his new assailant, but Whittlesey's eyes had retreated behind their heavy, wrinkled lids and evaded the bloodshot glare of the man in the aisle. With difficulty, Lawrence forced himself to answer with a semblance of calm.

"The questions my attorney desires to ask Mr. Kurtner are designed to assist in bringing out the truth," he said in a strained voice.

"Now get this straight," Harris broke in. "Witnesses are subject to examination by the coroner, the police, the jury, the legal representative of the accused, and nobody else. If everybody in the audience could bob up with cross-examination of every witness we'd never be through. You are not a witness in this case, and you are here at all only as a matter of courtesy. If you make a disturbance you can be put out, and if you go much farther you *will* be put out."

Lawrence's hand on the back of the bench quivered. If the bench had not been well anchored by the people sitting on it he would have lifted it and hurled it at the grim face of the man at the table. This small-town

policeman threatened him—him, John Lawrence—with his strong arm methods—threatened to throw him out like a bum in a drunken riot! With an effort that swelled the veins in his temples, he fought back the mist of red rage that suffused his mind.

" There are important points which should have been brought to the attention of this jury, and which have not been," he said in a loud, trembling voice. " If the witness hired by the police is not allowed to be questioned it can only be because those who should be trying to discover the criminal are afraid of testimony which they do not wish to have brought out."

Harris moved slightly, so that his back was turned squarely on Whittlesey. Whittlesey had made him yield once. He would not knuckle under again to this antagonist who dared to flout him. He had the whip hand, and he would use it. He could afford to keep his temper. It would look bad to the jury if he appeared to be flustered.

" Mr. Kurtner was given a free hand in his investigation. There is not the slightest reason why he should be subjected to cross-examination by spectators at this hearing. If the jury have any questions to ask of Mr. Kurtner I am sure the coroner will be glad to recall him." That was safe enough. The jurors were completely cowed by the tumult suddenly raised around them. Even Crandall maintained a blank silence. " It may not be out of place to add," Harris continued coolly, " that the foremost criminal investigator in the country has borne out, at every point, the theory originally formed by the police department working in conjunction with the sheriff's office."

" Yes!" Lawrence flamed. " The police started out with a theory and have questioned nothing that bolstered it up. But this inquest is not being held for the sole purpose of supporting a theory already held by the police. It is supposed to be held for the purpose of finding out the truth concerning Mrs. Cole's death!" Lawrence knew that he was beaten, but he hurled a

last furious stone against the high smooth wall behind which Harris had entrenched himself.

"Mr. Coroner, it is, of course, for you to decide whether you wish to admit any further testimony or to recall for questioning any of the witnesses already heard." Harris bowed across the table. The coroner would decide what he was told to decide.

The coroner fumbled with his watch and looked dubiously over his shoulder at Whittlesey. Whittlesey's only response was a slight shrug of his elephantine shoulders and a barely perceptible movement of the lips. The coroner strove to catch the words, but all he could make out of them was, "spilt milk."

"Well, I guess that's all. Before considering their verdict, the jury would like to go out to the ranch and look at the room. If we're to get back before dark we'd better be starting. This way, gentlemen."

The reporters at the press table jumped to their feet. One of the folding legs was kicked out of place, and the card table tilted steeply to the floor under a landslide of disregarded copy paper.

"You lucky stiffs!" Peter grinned over his shoulder as he piloted Barbara to the surging aisle. "It's too late for me. You got all that fracas for the morning papers." He bent a tousled bare head to Barbara's ear—his battered felt hat lay forgotten under the press table. "Keep an eye out. We've got to get hold of Jerry and Allison somehow. Then we'll slide into Bossy and follow the sightseeing party to the ranch."

## CHAPTER XXXVI

Peter and Barbara were unable to find either Jerry or Allison in the crowd that broke and scattered in all directions outside the pillared porch. But when they reached Bossy, parked on the side street, the two young

people were huddled in the back seat, shrinking out of sight behind the side curtains.

"Oh, it's you!" Allison exclaimed in tremulous relief. "John and Elsie were looking for me. But I—I don't want to be with them. I *won't* go to them! Nobody can make me, can they?" Her lips were white and trembling, but her face was set in desperate determination. She looked suddenly very young, like a terrified, defiant child.

With entire absence of self-consciousness. Jerry laid a steady arm across her shoulders.

"Nobody can make you do anything you don't want to do, Allison. Not while I'm here—and I'm going to be here," he said gravely. Then he turned to Peter. "I've been trying to persuade Allison not to go out to the ranch," he said. "I knew you'd be going anyhow, and I thought you wouldn't mind if I stayed with her."

"Please, I have to go." Allison faced Peter with dark, tragic eyes. "I know it's just that Jerry wants to spare me. I won't go into the—the room. But I have to be there. I'm afraid something might happen. I'm afraid that John——" Her throat worked pitifully for a moment before she could go on. "I've got to do what I can to prevent—anything else happening."

"You're afraid your brother-in-law might attack Asbury—or Harris?"

"I don't know. It's all such a terrible muddle."

"I think we'd better take Allison right along with us," Barbara said. "I'll be there to look after her. Jerry, if you're going to take on the job of protector just remember that the hardest thing in the world to bear is suspense. I think it will be much easier for Allison to go than to wait. When you're left waiting you face not only the thing that actually happens but a dozen other mutually exclusive things that might happen, and you suffer them all."

Peter had already jumped into the driver's seat and started the engine.

"Jerry, I want you to pry yourself loose from Allison

and let her sit on the front seat with me. I'm going to ask you some difficult questions, Allison. Are you game to sit up here and answer them?"

"Yes," she said briefly. "I'm—game," and without another word stepped out of the car and slipped into the place beside Peter.

"You're a brave girl," Peter said. "And that's lucky, because you'll need to be brave, and with all the will in the world, nobody else can give you courage, if you haven't got it within you. You said you wanted to keep away from your sister and brother-in-law. Is it because you are not sure——"

Allison's hands twisted in her lap.

"I'm not sure of anything! Only—I'm not one of them! If Elsie came to me and said that her husband or—she herself—had—had killed Mother I'd try to stand it. I'd try to think what was best to do, because Elsie is my sister. But they want to draw me in and keep me in the dark. When I was with Mother I was too young, I was caught, there was no other life that I could see. But there is another life, not like theirs. I couldn't help it before—or perhaps I was blind and weak and didn't know that I could. But I was so young. I didn't know. Only now I know that there's a choice, that I don't have to be like them. I'd rather be utterly alone all the rest of my life than go back and be one of them!"

"You're not going to be alone—don't you worry," Jerry said, so low that only Barbara caught the words and answered them with a quick friendly pressure of her fingers on his wrist.

"Then," Peter persisted, "when John Lawrence said that Chester Mason and the lawyer he tried to bring into question Kurtner represented the Cole family, you were not included?"

"I wasn't consulted at all. I did not even know they were coming, nor what they were going to do. I think that is why they have tried to get hold of me—to make it appear that the family is working together as a

unit, not Elsie and John as individuals. No one knows just where Father is—or if they do they haven't told me—so that leaves just the three of us."

"But if either of them were directly connected with your mother's death wouldn't they be glad enough to have the whole matter disposed of by a verdict of suicide?" Peter asked. "Perhaps they are like us—determined to get at the truth. And believe me, there was some truth, though I haven't an idea what it was, that Harris and Whittlesey were set on suppressing. They were scared to death it might pop out if they weren't careful."

Allison was silent for a moment. Then she asked quietly: "Is that what you think, yourself? That they wanted only the truth?"

"Well, no, I don't. I got the impression that Harris and Whittlesey wanted just one thing—a verdict of suicide. And that John Lawrence wanted just one thing—to pin it on Asbury. And yet it does seem strange——"

"Not if you know John Lawrence," Allison interrupted. "He's is a man of terrific determination. He cannot bear to be baulked. I've heard him tell that he has broken every man who has crossed him and that he never forgets a grudge. He seems proud of it. Perhaps it is because he is a self-made man. He fought his way up by making other men afraid of him. If he believed that Elsie and Asbury had—had deceived him, and that it happened because of Mother, he'd think of nothing, not even of danger to his own life, that stood in the way of what he'd call 'punishing' them."

"But what a horrible thing to believe!" Barbara's voice was small and breathless, as if she were looking down into the whirling darkness of an abyss. "And wouldn't he want to—to 'punish' Elsie, too?" It was appalling to be discussing these things with a girl of eighteen, yet not so appalling as the knowledge that to Allison they had long been familiar facts.

"He's never been sure of Elsie, you see." Allison

was staring rigidly in front of her, through the mud-specked windshield. "She was something else that he wanted to conquer. It wasn't just her wealth—he was rich, too. It was birth, position, the ways she took for granted and which he could never understand. She might have softened him, sweetened him. But instead of that she was always goading him. He could never be sure whether the things she did were customary in her world, or whether she was only trying to make him believe that they were. And Elsie's unforgiving, too, in her way. If anything has hurt her, or done her harm, she thinks it deserves to be—annihilated.

"Once, when I was little, I overturned a glass of water on her new frock. The look she gave me—I shudder even now when I think of it. It was at a tea party, and I had been allowed to come down for a little while. It wasn't what she said—she merely rang for the nurse to take me upstairs. But afterward, when I offered to pay for the dress out of my allowance, she said: 'I had to serve tea to my guests in a stained frock. Nothing you can do will wipe that out.' She looked as if she wished I were dead, where I could never be awkward again.

"I'm sure she forgot about it afterward, but I never forgot that look. Perhaps it seemed even worse to me because she thought it could be forgotten. If she thought that Mother, with her tormented jealousy, had set a trap so that she and John would find her and Mr. Asbury together—she couldn't unless she were out of her mind—I know she'd be horrified afterward—but if she came back to get Mother to make things right with John, and Mother wouldn't—— And it had been so long since Mother ran away from home, I suppose she didn't seem so close, like one's own mother——" Allison's voice faltered.

Peter swerved around a curve, barely missing the trunk of a tree that stood close to the road.

"We've got to realise that women do kill their own mothers—at least, some of them have done it," he said.

" I believe it would have to be a neurotic woman; but your sister is neurotic. In a way, though their wills clash intolerably, I have an idea that John and Elsie Lawrence understand each other pretty well. Both of them believe that they have a supreme right to clear the path of any obstacles in their way. If one of them did this thing the other would understand, knowing that whether it was done from uncontrollable anger, or revenge, or just the monstrous egotism that looks on opposition as unpardonable sin, the heart of either one of them could hold the thought of murder and justify it. With that justification they'd stand by each other, wouldn't they?"

" Yes," Allison barely breathed.

But for the moment Peter had forgotten Allison's presence. His thoughts raced at an incredible speed, and his foot unconsciously pressed the accelerator as if to force Bossy to keep up with the pounding in his brain.

" She fainted at the inquest. It might have been the sight of blood. It might have been fear—for herself or for someone else. There's that fourth tyre mark—or, for that matter, a car could easily have been left where the lane turns off the highway. By jiminy, I'd almost forgotten——" he turned abruptly to Allison. " Do you know whether Mrs. Lawrence has a rose-coloured silk dress?"

" I don't know—I've seen so little of her for years. But I shouldn't think so. Rose isn't her type. She's always worn a great deal of black—and jade green sometimes——"

" Well, she might have something in rose for all that. It's worth looking into. But the telephone call ——" Peter jerked the car with a terrific jolt between the fence posts at the turning of the lane to the ranch house. " Why didn't I think of that before? The telephone girl might have heard it wrong. The words might easily not have been ' He's killing me ' at all, but ' *She's* killing me!"

## CHAPTER XXXVII

PETER nosed Bossy into a parking space among the throng of cars which filled the door yard of the ranch. The jurors, stretching their legs, strolled aimlessly about, a look of disinterested curiosity on their faces, as if they were attending an auction sale. Asbury had abandoned his gum and leaned against a tree, munching an apple. His face betrayed no sign that the place had been his home, the battleground of passions of love and hate, of jealousy and cruelty—passions like sharp knives thrust into the soul, tearing at his life, which must always bear the mark of the years when he and Natalie Cole had loved and hated in this place.

He stooped, selected an apple from those that lay on the grass under the tree, polished it on the sleeve of his sweater, and handed it to the deputy sheriff standing by his side. Soon most of the jurors were taking similar advantage of their opportunity. The trees near the house were not a part of the commercial orchard, and their fruit was allowed to lie where it dropped in warm globules of fallen sunshine. In the silence the crisp munching of many teeth was clearly audible.

"None of them really care much, do they?" Allison murmured.

"No, my dear, they don't," Barbara answered gently. "If we all cared too much about other people's troubles, if it stabbed into us from all sides at once, none of us could bear it."

"I know. I'm sorry for Mr. Comstock, and yet his death does not pierce me with the real sense of what he must have suffered." Peter had told both Allison and the coroner the bare fact of Comstock's suicide, and the body had been removed for the later formality of an inquest, which in his case would be mere routine. "It's a peaceful sort of sadness. It has not spoiled the orchard for me, because he died with the trees that he

loved best, and I know the trees were glad to do what they could for him at the end."

Peter, who had been strolling unostentatiously among the crowd, leaned over the edge of the car.

"I am sure you have nothing to fear from what may happen here. Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence did not come. It won't take long. You might just as well wait here."

"I am a little bit tired," Allison said with a wan smile. Her face was indeed white and lined with the marks of fatigue. "If you don't mind I'd like to slip off, quite by myself. There's a tree with a crotch quite high among the leaves, where I used to sit. There's something about the leaves, and the little pointed bits of sky that you see between them—they've always helped me, somehow. You won't mind if I go alone, will you, Jerry?"

Barbara smiled at the new gentleness that crept into Allison's voice when she spoke to Jerry, at her anxiety not to wound him.

"That would be the best thing in the world for you," she said quickly. "Jerry and I will wait here and honk when it's time to go."

As Allison flitted away among the tree trunks Barbara turned to Jerry, whose face was ingenuously hurt and anxious.

"Do you think I'm bothering her?" he asked with one of his inundating blushes. "I don't mean to. Do you think she—doesn't like to have me about so much? It's only that—I wanted to do all I could for her——"

The smile deepened at the corners of Barbara's lips —a very tender smile.

"She used to tell you to go away Jerry. She doesn't do that any more. Now she asks you not to mind. There's quite a difference. It's just that there's a time when people can't help us, not even the people we care for—or perhaps I should say, especially the people we care for. The sky and the leaves, they

comfort because they are impersonal, they don't impinge on our nerves with any sensitiveness to our pain."

"This way, gentlemen!" The coroner had arrived, accompanied by Kurtner. He herded the jurors, still crunching apples, up the steps to the door. Asbury remained outside, slinging an apple core over his shoulder and pressing a new selection with the ball of his thumb to test its ripeness.

"I do wonder if that man is really just a well-built animal or if he's a consummate actor," Barbara said with a touch of acerbity. "I'd like awfully to stick a pin in him."

"It's partly pose, I guess," Jerry hazarded, "the only kind of pose he knows. But it's partly, too, that he just isn't one of the people who 'look before and after.' I don't think he'd even know what it meant, that 'our sincerest laughter still with some pain is fraught.'" He blushed again, with a shy sidewise glance at Barbara, as if she might find his quoting of poetry ridiculous.

But Barbara nodded gravely.

"The poets discovered all the psychology before other folks got around to it," she said.

Peter had left the car and was insinuating himself among the jurors, who pressed through the narrow screen door and stood in line against the walls of the room. Some of them still held their apples; others, with a vague idea of respect to the dead, tossed them out through the open screen. Peter, peering over the shoulder of the man in front of him, saw that the room was festooned with strings drawn from one point to another of the walls and furniture, like an immense and complicated cat's cradle. A roll of newspaper, taken from the bundles stacked in the box near the stove, stood up right on the floor.

Kurtner, a small curved pipe clenched between his teeth, stood in the middle of the room.

"The strings show the trajectory of the blood drops. The newspaper indicates the position of the body," he

explained tersely. The fingers curved about the stem of his pipe gesticulated in a smooth arc. The roll of newspaper, canted slightly to one side, took on a sudden aspect of sinister grotesquerie. The pool of blood in the centre of the floor was stiff and blackened, its surface cracked like dried mud. The air was heavy with a dull, thick odour, mingled with the pungent juicy scent of apples.

"I will now reconstruct the occurence of the night of September tenth," Kurtner said in his clear, dictatorial voice. "The gun on the table—here. May I have the stick, please?" His slender fingers closed on the stick, mottled with ugly brown stains. His glasses caught the light, gleaming like the eyes of some disembodied intelligence, as he stooped, spread a sheet of newspaper on the floor, and sat down with crossed knees, Buddha-fashion. Replacing the pipe between his teeth, he reached forward for the gun, set the muzzle to his lips, and with the other hand thrust the end of the stick against the trigger.

There was something ghastly and absurd in the contrast between the neatly clad figure sitting cross-legged on the floor, a pipe in his mouth, and that other figure in gaudy Chinese silk who had fallen backward at a blinding flash of light, a rending crash of sound. But Kurtner was quite unaware of that grisly absurdity, with its air of an uncanny, demoniac, practical joke.

The juror in front of Peter turned around, his knees sagging, his face tinged with a curious greenish pallor.

"I guess—I need a little air——"

Peter quickly made way for him, and he stumbled to the porch, where he leaned against the door jamb, panting.

"Well, I don't know," Peter caught fragments of conversation as the jurors filed out, "it looks reasonable, all right."

"The question is, could she reach it?"

"He did, easily."

" Well, they say she was a little woman. I'm not so certain."

" I guess it happened the way he said it would, but I don't know as I'd want to take my oath on it. I don't quite get the hang of all them strings; that trajectory stuff is beyond me."

" He knows what he's talking about, though. And cool as a cucumber, sitting there with his pipe in one side of his mouth and the gun in the other. Somehow, I half expected it to go off."

" I think they ought to have let the Cole's lawyer talk if he wanted to. It didn't seem right to shut him off like that. Fair play to all, is what I say."

Peter made his way back to the car as Allison came running with rapid, stumbling steps across the lawn.

" There's no hurry, dear," Barbara reassured her. " I told you we'd honk for you."

" I know," Allison panted. " But I've something to tell you."

Peter took her arm and helped her into the car.

" Sit here quietly and get your breath," he said. " They have to go back and consider their verdict. There's plenty of time."

Peter busied himself in starting the engine, but he seemed to have difficulty with it, for all the other cars backed and turned their way out of the driveway ahead of him.

" Now, then," he said at last, " what is it?"

" It isn't anything so important in itself, but it shows that all this—the whole inquest—has been nothing but a ghastly farce.'

" Ye-es?' Peter drawled. " I suspected as much."

" I climbed up into my tree that I told you about—I've always called it ' my ' tree ever since I found it. I was sitting there very quietly, just soaking in the peace of it, and my thoughts must have been far away, for I heard nobody coming until there were voices right under the tree. I looked down through the branches

and there were Mr. Harris and that enormously fat man——"

"Mr. Whittlesey, yes."

"They were arguing. I didn't know just what to do. I didn't like to drop right down out of the tree on top of them, and while I hesitated I heard what they were saying, and then—well, I simply couldn't move. Mr. Whittlesey did not raise his voice, but he seemed very much annoyed.

"'It was a mistake not to let Lawrence trot out his lawyer—a mistake that will very likely cost us the verdict,' he said.

"'I don't care whether it was a mistake or not. I wasn't going to let him get away with it,' Mr. Harris answered angrily.

"'If you'd thought less about Lawrence, who doesn't matter, and more about the psychological effects on the jury, you'd be more helpful to your own interests,' Mr. Whittlesey said.

"'Damn the psychological effect!' Mr. Harris was almost shouting.

"'I only wish we could damn it. But the jury will think Lawrence was badly treated and wasn't given a fair show. Besides, it was unnecessary. Kurtner could have answered anything they put to him. You jammed our case to no purpose whatever.'

"Harris dropped his voice then, and they both turned their backs to go, but I heard him quite clearly.

"'How do I know he could have answered?' he said. 'How the devil do I know that Asbury wasn't actually there and killed her?'"

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

"'THE deceased met her death from a gunshot wound through the head inflicted by party unknown.' In other words, the jury gives up the riddle and places no bets."

Peter had dropped Jerry and Allison at the hotel, with the promise to bring them the news as soon as the jury had come to a decision. In the empty room, from which spectators were excluded, the verdict, after less than half an hour's retirement during which the reporters slouched in attitudes of extreme boredom on the benches, came with an effect of dreary anticlimax. The parade of witnesses, the play and counterplay of emotions, had reached an inconclusive end, and there was nothing left to do but to go home. Even gossip, with nothing new to feed on, would soon die down. The reporters discussed the relative merits of poker and bridge as a means of whiling away the hours on the night train to the city.

" Sorry, boys, but I can't join you. I drove down; anyway, I've got to plug out a story for the first run," Peter said. He did not tell them that for him the Cole story was not closed, that the verdict of the coroner's jury marked not an end but a new beginning.

" ' Party unknown '—does that mean they think somebody else did it?" Allison asked, when the three gathered in Peter's room.

" No," Peter answered. " It means that there was enough atmosphere of mystery, of holding things back, to make them unwilling to declare pointblank that the wound was self-inflicted. If Kurtner had been cross-examined, and had stood up under it, as I have no doubt he would, he could probably have knocked Mason's testimony into a cocked hat. Mason had a better jury manner, and that counts for a lot, but after all, he's a babe compared with Kurtner.

" But it didn't look well to have Whittlesey there and then refuse to hear Lawrence's lawyer, though legally it was quite correct. It was a poor gesture, and the jury wanted to show its disapproval, law or no law. On the other hand, there was not enough evidence to warrant mentioning a specific person, meaning Asbury. By the way, the sheriff tells me that Asbury will be released this evening."

"I'm glad of that," Allison said unexpectedly. "Despite what I heard Mr. Harris say," she went on, answering the unspoken question in Peter's lifted eyebrows, "I somehow can't think that he did it. It's not that he cared too much for Mother, but that he didn't care enough. It must take something rather tremendous inside you to bring you to the point of taking some one's life. Mr. Asbury was very much annoyed by Mother, and he was cruel, in a way. He didn't care how much he hurt her. He resented her interference, and he could deal any wound to her spirit with indifference, because he doesn't think much about other people. And it's only fair to say that she didn't care about him, either, as a separate person, but only in relation to herself. He could have left her absolutely ruined and heart-broken without a glance of pity. But I just can't believe that he felt deeply enough to kill her."

"You know, that's a pretty detached analysis for a young girl to make." Peter turned a reflective gaze on Allison through a swirl of tobacco smoke.

"Detached? I've had to be detached. I've had nothing to do but look on, all these years. It isn't as if I could ever turn to Mother with the dependence of a child. It was she who turned to me, as an outlet for her storms of emotion. I felt sorry for her, but I could not love her. There was no room for my love in her life. And she made me turn in on myself and resolve never to let emotion gain any hold on me—she made all emotion seem so disastrous, so shattering to one's inner self, one's personal integrity. Her death, after the first physical shock of it, has not seemed nearly so awful to me as her life—not because of what Asbury did to her, but because of what she did to herself."

"I hate to drag you through any more of this—you've had more than enough," Peter said. "The inquest is over, and I've done the job I was sent here to do. But I'm not satisfied with that verdict. Only, if I go on with it there's no telling where it will lead. Are you sure you don't want to leave things as they

are? Are you sure you want to know the truth, no matter how painful it might be—always supposing that there's a chance of digging it out?"

The girl who had vowed to shut emotion out of her life turned to Jerry with a singularly clear and trusting look in her dark eyes. She was unconscious that her look betrayed her, for this new emotion, with its sweet confidence and loyalty, had come to her without awareness or recognition. But Jerry knew. For in that look Allison, who had known of love only as the malign grip of self-absorbed, destructive passion, told him that she would walk fearlessly through any darkness, any shame, any danger, in the strength of his comradeship. His eyes held hers steadily, answering that look with one of uttermost loyalty.

"Let's go on with it, Allison," he said, and neither of them noticed his assumption that they were equally concerned in the decision. "As it is now you'll always live with the suspicion that one of your own family might have been responsible—and you won't know which one. "You'll have the same shuddering dread of all of them, and of your mother as well."

"I knew you'd understand!" Allison's tired voice lilted with the surprised happiness of a child in that discovery of understanding. "It seems a dreadful thing for me to tell Peter to go on when it might mean finding out that a member of my own family is a—murderer. Only, if that is true it would still be true, whether Peter found it out or not. And that is what really matters, isn't it?"

"Yes, that is what really matters," Barbara agreed. "But it takes the rarest kind of intellectual courage to see it. Jerry, this Allison of yours is a rather remarkable person."

"I've always known that," Jerry said, but his blue eyes flashed her a look of grateful appreciation.

"I don't think I'd ever feel I'd been fair to Mother," Allison said slowly, "if I refused this chance to clear —all of us. There's the possibility, too, that with all

our suspicions, Peter's trail may lead to some one outside. It would be horrible to live with such a thought of Elsie and John if it was only my own dark mind suspecting them wrongly. But the thing that would be the hardest of all to face is if Mother really did kill herself for the reason they've tried to show."

"Barbara thinks she didn't do that," Peter said.

"I'm so glad some one else thinks that," Allison said gratefully. "If in the very moment of her death she tried to put the blame on an innocent person I think it would be worse than committing a murder. To strike at some one with your words, some one defenceless, and then to step out of reach where you could never be found, never set it right—I can't believe that of Mother. There's something crafty and—and perfidious about it. She did many wild and bad and foolish things in the torment of her own nature. She wasn't wise or clear-sighted or just or generous. But I can't believe that she would strike a mean blow in the dark and run away from the consequences in the escape of death. That would be a cowardly thing to do, and Mother was never a coward. I know Mr. Kurtner is a great man, but he did not know Mother—not as I knew her. He seems terribly convincing, and yet there's something that rises up in me and says that, with all the proof in the world, he can't be right!"

Peter rumpled his thatch of black hair until it stood up in a shaggy, recalcitrant halo above his long and solemn face.

"Even Kurtner isn't God," he said. "Mathematics isn't everything, though you've got to accept it, as far as it goes. We must start on the basis of Kurtner's facts, because it's a sure bet that they are facts if Kurtner says they are. He showed that the facts were consistent with suicide, and that there were no other facts discernible to contradict that conclusion. All the material evidence is for it, and there is no evidence against it. Q.E.D. for Kurtner. Any other explanation would be far-fetched. But, by jiminy, life so often *is* far-fetched!

Kurtner proved that Mrs. Cole could have committed suicide. He did not prove that nothing else could have happened, on the basis of those same facts. There were no signs of a second person in the room. There still remains the possibility that a second person was in the room and left no signs."

"It's a queer thing that Harris still thinks Asbury might have done it," Jerry interpolated, "when he had two alibis. Both the alibis could not be true, but it certainly looks as if one of them was."

"For some reason he was dead scared that the alibi brought out by old Rutters might be true—though I don't know why. But I don't know why he distrusted Mrs. Newell unless he thought she was in love with Asbury and would try to cover him." Peter's forehead was creased by a worried frown. Then he pressed his hair back with restless fingers and sat bolt upright, his eyes shining with an inner illumination behind his thick spectacles.

"The whole trouble is that we know too many things," he said jerkily. "They're cluttering up the landscape. Some of them are important, and some of them are purely accidental. The trouble is, we don't know which is which. That's the great advantage of fiction—it never gets messed up with the irrelevant. We've got to go to work and clear out the underbrush. There's that fourth tyre, for instance. Allison, you're sure you want to help?"

Allison looked slowly from Barbara with her affectionate smile to Peter's eager, troubled face. Then her eyes turned to Jerry and lingered there, as if in his freckled ingenuous countenance she found a hidden source of strength.

"You're the only people I've ever wanted to trust utterly," she said. "Yes, Peter, I'll help."

"Then what kind of car does your father drive?" Peter asked abruptly.

"A big eight—a Pierce-Arrow—painted gray."

"And the tyres? But of course! What a fool I am!

' Cole Tyres Burn Up Mileage.' Why he *made* tyres! They'd be Cole tyres, wouldn't they, Allison?"

"I—I never thought. He was very proud of Cole tyres. Yes, I'm sure he used them."

"Then that's a job for you, Jerry. Go out to a garage and make me a drawing of the tread pattern on a Cole tyre of the size for a Pierce-Arrow."

But as Jerry rose hastily from his perch on the foot of the bed Peter's hand was raised to check him.

"Not this minute. Wait a shake. Allison, have you a specimen of your father's handwriting?"

"No—that is, nothing written to me. He did not write much to either of us after Mother left him. But I did find a letter to Mother among her things. It was written from Birmingham, England. It did not say much —only that he'd taken this trip to think things out and that when he came back she would hear from him."

"Bully!" Narrow points of flame leaped in Peter's gray eyes. "You'll have to give me that letter, Allison. And now, since I know you want me to go on wherever it leads, I'll show you—this." Peter drew a yellow envelope from his pocket and unfolded the telegram which it contained. "I don't know just what it means, myself, but it's bound to clear up some of the underbrush."

"You mean—it was Father I heard leaving the ranch on the night Mother was shot?" Allison's voice was hardly more than a whisper.

"I don't know. But I'm going to find out. It seemed to me mighty queer that there was no word whatever from your father when the mystery of his wife's death was on the front page of every paper in the country. So I asked Jimmy to wire Detroit and check up on him. This is what he got."

Peter spread the yellow slip before him and read: "' Clarkson Cole returned unexpectedly from England. Check with New York shows Cole not on any passenger list. Spent two days in Detroit, then started west by automobile. Chauffeur reports Cole had him get road

maps to west coast. Drove alone, leaving chauffeur. Not registered any hotel here. What's the big idea? signed Jimmy.' "

In dead silence Peter refolded the message and returned it to his pocket.

" But—but he never did put his own name on the passenger list when he travelled!" Allison said suddenly. She had listened rigidly, like one entranced, to Peter's reading of the telegram.

" The deuce he didn't!" Peter exclaimed. " Why not?"

" Well, you see, Father is what they call a big capitalist," Allison answered. " Reporters would always meet him at the dock and ask him about the rubber market or political conditions in Europe or things like that. They'd always be questions he didn't want to answer, or else knew nothing about."

" That's the perfect technique of ship news reporting," Peter acknowledged with a grin.

" So he always travelled under another name," Allison continued. " I remember we all went with him once, when I was a little girl. What was the name he used?" She bowed her face in her hands, struggling to recapture the childish recollection.

" My God," Peter breathed reverently, " try to remember!"

" It was some word about food—Baker? Frye? I was just a little thing—I remember thinking it was a great joke."

" Try the C's," Peter suggested. " He wasn't really trying to hide under an alias. The chances are he'd take something fairly close to his own name."

Allison dropped her hands and stared into Peter's face.

" I know," she said, " it was Clarence Cooke!"

## CHAPTER XXXIX

For three days Peter knew the desolation of long hours of work without result or even encouragement.

"You're on a wild-goose chase, Peter," Jimmy remonstrated, as Peter leaned despondently over the city desk after a day spent in a fruitless examination of hotel registers. "The Cole case is dead. If you hadn't done good enough work on it to deserve a little time off—and if we were getting anything more exciting than third-class fires in the way of news—I'd remind you that you're supposed to hang around the *Herald* office ready to take assignments.'

"Time off!" Peter flared. As usual, opposition roused him from his mood of profound dejection. "If this is your idea of a vacation you need to be psyched. The Cole case may be dead, but if the *Herald* comes out with an exculsive on who killed Mrs. Cole there'll be some little wake, and you know it!"

"Well, we can't afford to spend too much time on it. If you can't bring in anything by the end of the week we'll have to call it quits." There was no mistaking the untimatum in Jimmy's voice.

"Jimmy, nobody would ever compare you to 'patience on a monument, smiling at grief,'" Peter protested. But Jimmy, who knew how to play upon Peter's temperament with the skill of a virtuoso, noted that the dishevelled figure before him had straightened and that the long face had lost something of its disconsolate droop. "It may be a wild-goose chase, but the only way to catch a wild goose is to chase it. By the way," he added with elaborate unconcern, "I brought Jerry Dean up to help me check on the hotels."

"Hells bells!" Jimmy roared. "Do you think the *Herald* is going to pay two men to work full time on the Cole story—or worse, on the chance that there may just possibly be a Cole story to work on? If you do you've got another think coming."

" The *Herald* isn't paying him," Peter said quietly. " He's doing it on his own time."

" Don't be silly," Jimmy growled with vicious sarcasm. " If the kid's such a fool as to work for nothing I suppose I'll have to be his nursemaid and protect him from you. What are you, anyhow—a Simon Legree?"

But Peter was not in the least abashed by the city editor's assault.

" He's a good kid," he said. " You ought to bring him out of the sticks and give him a chance in the main office. He has persistence and imagination."

" If any more reporters with imagination are let loose around here I'm going to resign before they get out commitment papers on me," Jimmy grunted. " When you've quite finished with your blandishments, getting a poor inexperienced kid to work for nothing—filling him full of soft soap, I suppose, about the intangible rewards of the newspaper game—bring him in here and I'll look him over. If he turns out to be no good you won't hear the last of it very soon, either." The city editor reached for a bundle of proofs in the basket, but turned to add, " Oh, yes, and tell him to put in a swindle sheet at the end of the week. Lord, what I have to put up with!"

" Thanks," Peter said briefly, " I knew you'd see it."

" See it, nothing! I'd do almost anything to get out of seeing you moping around and looking like a dog getting ready to howl. But remember, this week's your limit."

Peter's wide mouth extended in a cheerful grin as Jimmy seized the telephone ringing at his elbow. Jimmy's scathing words had had their intended affect of lifting Peter's mercurial spirits and renewing his confidence.

" Twenty-seven on twenty-eight," Jimmy barked into the transmitter. " Take this call Peter."

Peter returned to his desk and sank with suddenly realised weariness into his chair.

" Good Lord, it's five o'clock. Why didn't I get out of here five minutes ago when I had a chance?" he lamented. " Yes—hello. Speak up, can't you?" he said irritably. But as he recognised the voice on the other end of the wire both irritation and weariness were forgotten. " Hold it. I said, ' Hold it!' Oh, my God, don't you understand English? Stay there, stick, don't budge. I'll be with you in ten minutes." He slammed the receiver on the hook with one hand and reached for his hat with the other. " Listen to this, Jimmy, and then talk about wild geese. Clarkson Cole, the millionaire tyre king, is registered under the name of Clarence Cooke at a second-rate joint called the Hotel Grand. I'm going around there now. And just park it some place where you won't forget that it was your cub correspondent, Jerry Dean of Medbury, who found him.

As Peter's wailing whistle died away down the hall Jimmy removed his eye shade and hung it on the metal spindle at the side of his desk preparatory to going home. He leaned back, turning a pencil end to end, waiting for an office boy to deliver the last batch of copy from an inter-urban car. The fan-shaped wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepened in a smile, and as he twirled the eye shade with the point of his pencil he broke into a silent, Mephistophelian chuckle. It cheered Peter immensely to be told to go to hell, and Peter had been greatly in need of cheering. It was Peter's hunch, Peter's planning, that had resulted in the discovery of Clarkson Cole; yet even as he darted to the elevator with that ungodly whistle on his lips he had paused to give the credit to Jerry Dean.

" Peter Piper will never be a millionaire—it isn't done by watching out for the other fellow," Jimmy addressed the whirling eye shade, " but he's one of the damnedest good reporters the Lord ever made!"

Peter was still whistling as he lounged nonchalantly across the lobby of the Hotel Grand and accosted Jerry, who sat in one of the worn leather arm-chairs where he

could watch both the elevator and the outer door. Peter dropped into the adjoining chair.

"You're dead sure it's he?" he asked in a low voice.

"The handwriting's the same—there's no mistaking those capital 'C's,'" Jerry answered. "Besides, he answers to Allison's description. He's in Room 410. He got his key and went up just before I telephoned you."

"Good stuff! Now, Jerry, you just step over to a house telephone and call 410. Say, 'Mr. Cole, I'm going to marry your daughter, and I'm here with a friend at Allison's request. May we come up?'"

"But——"

"You *are* going to marry Allison, aren't you?"

Jerry's face flushed a deep crimson.

"You bet I am. But suppose he denies that he's Cole?"

"If he does we'll sit here until he comes out and nab him. But he won't."

"You think——"

"I'll do my thinking after we've interviewed Cole. Jerry, if you let this habit grow on you of going through the unexpurgated longer catechism every time you're out to get a story, you'd better work on the Encyclopædia Britannica. They get out an edition about once in twenty years, I believe. Suppose you hop to the telephone."

Jerry obediently "hopped," and a moment later turned from the instrument with a deep sigh of relief.

"He didn't try to deny anything," he said. "Somehow, I'm rather glad of that. He didn't even gasp. He was just silent for a minute, and then said, cool as a cucumber, 'If you care to come up, I'll see you.' I—I do hope he won't think it's awfully cheeky of me to say I'm going to marry Allison. I never thought of that before—about there being such a lot of money, I mean. I hope he won't think I've taken advantage of Allison's being so young and inexperienced. If he

thought I was an unscrupulous fortune hunter I—I'd hate it a lot."

"You're the very picture of a hardened, unprincipled swindler," Peter said solemnly. "As for Cole, he's probably not worrying about whether you can support his daughter in the style appropriate to the Cole millions. He's the one with a considerable lot of explaining to do—and something tells me that he's going to do it."

"I hope he won't think it was taking an unfair advantage, using Allison's name to get an interview," Jerry demurred.

"Allison told us to go on with it, didn't she? Besides, Mr. Clarkson Cole is going to tell his story to Peter Piper of the *Herald* and be darned grateful that he isn't telling it to the police instead." Peter heaved an exaggerated sigh. "I can't help wondering if you're going through life arguing with Allison at the length of a Platonic dialogue. If so, that girl has my most profound sympathy."

Cole answered Peter's knock at the door of Room 410 almost immediately. He waved the two men into the small hotel bedroom with no consciousness of his shabby surroundings. The tall, spare, stooping figure might have been ushering them into the mahogany office of the president of the Cole Tyre Company. The only evidence of the immense financial power wielded by Clarkson Cole lay in his complete indifference to his surroundings. He could afford to ignore his environment because, whatever it might be, he dominated it with quiet assurance. He motioned Peter and Jerry to seats and looked down at them from a height accentuated by his thinness, a quizzical gleam in his dark, sunken eyes.

"I assume," he said in a voice at once decisive and casual, as if disposing of an obvious but unimportant detail, "that your mention of an engagement to my daughter was a ruse to induce me to see you. Clever

but unnecessary. Well, now that you are here, what do you wish to say?"

Jerry leaped to his feet, facing the old man's pride of power with his pride of youth and outraged honesty.

"I'm not in the habit of lying!" he stormed.

"No? Well, it's a useful habit—one that you will doubtless acquire later on," Cole said with frigid indifference.

"Do stow it, Jerry; this isn't a family conference," Peter said sharply. "Mr. Cole, my young friend Jerry Dean does happen to be in love with your daughter, and his personal feelings have a way of interfering with more pressing matters. He doesn't seem to be able to forget it for very long at a time. But I'm not similarly handicapped. I came to ask you why you drove alone to your wife's ranch on the night of her death and have remained in hiding under an assumed name ever since."

## CHAPTER XL

PETER glanced keenly at Cole's face as he made his announcement. It was a harsh, commanding face, with deep lines of self-repression about the mouth, a curved, beaklike-nose, and a high steep brow mounting like a cliff to meet the mass of white hair in which only an occasional dark thread remained. The undiminished energy in the flashing dark eyes, deeply sunk in bony caves, contrasted oddly with that silvery whiteness above. The face was the face of a doer, a veteran in the warfare of life; but the eyes were the introspective eyes of a dreamer, capable of fierce concentration, but of a concentration on inner ends, whose meaning lay deeply hidden within their shadowy caverns. Those eyes were turned to Peter with a brief, stabbing glance which saw much and revealed nothing. The rock-like impassivity of his face was not broken by so much as the quiver of a muscle.

"By what right do you ask me what I have done or

why I did it?" he said in a voice that reminded Peter of the splintering of ice.

Peter leaned back in his chair with tantalising nonchalance.

" I'm not asking what you did, because I already know. Your daughter heard some one's car leaving the ranch just after the shot was fired that killed her mother. I found the marks left by your tyres on the driveway, and a bit of gray paint from your car where it scraped the fence post—everybody seems to hit that post—and incidentally, I found you, which was quite a little job in itself. I guess that shows that I know what I'm talking about. As to why you did it I haven't the faintest right in the world to ask, but I'm doing you a favour by giving you the chance to answer. I'm Peter Piper of the *Herald,* and I did not turn this information over to the police. I came to you with it instead. You've had experience in matching your wits with financiers. I've had experience in matching mine with jailbirds. That being so, I think we meet on equal terms, Mr. Cole."

The faintest glimmer of a smile lightened the depths of the old man's eyes.

" And if I tell you—what will you do?" he asked.

" It depends on what you tell me. Curiously enough, I'm going to believe you, within reason. You are nobody's fool."

Cole bowed with a slight, ironic inclination of his head.

" You know perfectly well that if you killed her, your game is up. If you didn't I'm going to find out who did."

" In order to serve the ends of justice, I presume?"

" In order to save Allison from a lifelong torture of suspicion and dread!" Jerry burst out.

" Shall we say—in order to get an exclusive for the *Herald?*" Peter smiled.

" So you think I killed my wife?" Cole stood idly

by the desk, fingering the loose sheets of paper in the letter rack.

" I will tell you why you might have killed her," Peter said firmly. " You are a man of immense concentration of purpose. In some ways you are a very romantic person."

Again the dark eyes lifted with that startled, probing glance.

" Oh, I know that most people have never guessed that hidden strain of romanticism," Peter answered the look. " But it's there. For years you concentrated on your business with all the romantic intensity of your nature. You wanted to found, not only a fortune but a dynasty. The Cole Tyre Company was a great achievement. To you it was more than commercial success. It was your creation, imperishable, like a great work of art. And the unblemished pride of the Cole family was to be another monument.

" I don't think you loved your wife. Her obsession with personal emotion was foreign to you. Your mind moved in a larger world. But when you retired from business with one of your great ambitions fulfilled all your energy turned into the other channel, cutting it deeper. When your wife ran away with Asbury you tried to cut her off from your life. But when your health failed you no longer had your business to absorb all your active interest. And it looked as if your wife's total lack of discretion would make it impossible to keep on averting an open scandal.

" You had passed off her long absence as due to ill health, to travel. But the continued subterfuge was increasingly difficult. It was not love but pride that took you back to her, to insist that she should yield to the demands of that other intense ambition of yours—the pride of the Cole family. You are not accustomed to opposition. In fact, that is what is the matter with all of you—life has always yielded before you. None of you have ever known discipline—except Allison. Life

has been harsh enough for her, despite the Cole millions."

"How—how do you know all this?" Cole sank slowly backward into a chair. He suddenly looked like a very old man.

"Oh, I'm a pretty good guesser," Peter said modestly.

"There's never been any one who knew——"

"You didn't let them. You kept everything locked up in yourself. If you'd shared things with your wife and the children perhaps they wouldn't have travelled so far away from you. You're very much alone now."

"Yes, I'm very much alone." There was no self-pity in Cole's voice. "I've never risked appealing to others for companionship or understanding. They didn't see it as I saw it—the glory of the thing I was trying to build. They thought I was just a business man. I couldn't show it to them, and have them turn away, trampling it with their indifference." He seemed to have forgotten Peter's presence, but his craglike features softened in the hint of a smile, like a flash of sunshine on a worn headland.

"Very well, young man." His voice regained its old incisive resonance. "I seem to have made a mess of things. It's too late to help that now. But it took you, a stranger, to see what it is that I was trying to do. I think you were reckless enough to say that you would believe what I told you. There have been many times in my career when I deemed it wise not to tell the truth, you know."

"I think you are going to tell the truth now," Peter said calmly.

"It's very little, and it does not sound particularly credible. I did go to the ranch, as you say. I meant to force my wife to return. Naturally, the visit was to be strictly private. I did not care whether Asbury was there or not—I could crush him with one hand." Cole extended a bony, wrinkled hand—an old man's hand.

Yet the knotted fingers held a suggestion of more than physical power.

" The lights were on, but the house was very silent as I approached. I knocked at the front door, but there was no answer, so I went around to the back. The door was open, and the screen door was unlatched. I stepped in—and saw my wife lying on the floor, dead. I went back to my car and drove away. That is all I know."

" You saw your wife's dead body on the floor and you did not call for help?" Jerry gasped. His round face was a mask of astonishment, the freckles standing out in a pattern of bold relief against its pallor.

" I hoped it might never be found out that she was my wife," Cole answered. " In that case the whole problem was solved. I knew, of course, that she was passing as Mrs. Asbury."

" And you didn't care any more than that?" Jerry insisted, wide eyed and incredulous.

" I cared more about—other things. Mrs. Cole as a person passed out of my life six years ago."

" But when Mrs. Cole's identity was established why didn't you come forward?" Peter asked.

" I will admit that for the first time in my life, I was nonplussed. I did not know what to do. I had no information of any value to offer. The best thing to hope for was to have the whole affair hushed up as quickly as possible."

" Yet you did not go away. You stayed here," Peter asserted.

" I had my own reason for that."

" May I guess what that reason was?"

" You are a rather astute guesser, young man. Perhaps we'd better leave it at that."

" No," Peter persisted. " You've said yourself that it's too late. You stayed close by to watch, because you were afraid that suspicion would turn toward John and Elsie Lawrence. If that had happened you would have thrown all your millions, all your power, into a defence of the Cole name."

" But it didn't happen." The light in Cole's eyes was the flash of a naked sword.

" You knew about their visit to the ranch and what happened there?" Jerry asked in puzzled bewilderment.

" It is quite easy to know a good many things. But I needn't be mysterious about it. Neither John nor Elsie is of a reticent nature. Elsie's vindictiveness against her mother for laying what she considered to be a trap approached hysteria. John was not brought up to vent his rage in deliberate murder. But he is quite capable of having gone back for the express purpose of letting loose the vials of his wrath on Mrs. Cole for her part on throwing Asbury and Elsie together, and in the course of that quarrel there is no telling what might have happened. I have not been able to obtain a satisfactory account of the movements of either of them on the night in question. I have watched accounts of the inquest closely, and John Lawrence's animosity toward Asbury and eagerness to pin the guilt of my wife's death on him were sufficiently obvious. I was surprised that they escaped the notice of the jury."

" A coroner's jury is not a very noticing body," Peter commented. " You are very candid about all this. Of course, I asked you to be frank, but I'm a bit surprised, for all that."

" The case is closed." Cole spoke with icy finality.

Peter met the tyrannous determination in the old man's gaze without faltering.

" Pardon me, Mr. Cole. You are a millionaire—but I am a newspaper man. The case is not closed as long as I am working on it. Suppose I had reason to find your daughter or son-in-law, or both of them, guilty of murder?"

" You could not do it."

" I could, if it's the truth."

" Not even if it's the truth. If I find that they are in danger, I shall confess to my wife's murder myself. And I shall take care to provide a chain of unassailable evidence before I do it. If the Cole name is to crash,

only one generation shall suffer. You wonder that I dared to tell you the truth? It is because I know that if necessary I can take the truth and twist it—like this!" The knotted hands seized a sheet of paper from the desk, twisted it into a torn spiral, and cast it into the waste-paper basket. "If this generation has bungled, our children shall not be caught in the wheel. If the Cole name is to go down in disgrace it shall be my disgrace, not theirs, as it was my dream, not theirs. Not you nor any one will have the wit or the power to stop me. You are a bright young man, Mr. Piper—but I am Clarkson Cole!"

## CHAPTER XLI

"I DON'T understand him," Jerry said as they waited for the elevator. "He neglected his children all these years—Allison says she hardly knew him as a child, and he'd have left her to face her mother's death alone if Mrs. Cole could have continued to pass as Asbury's wife. Yet he must have loved them in some queer, twisted fashion, if he was willing to go to the gallows to protect Elsie."

"He'd see to it that he missed the gallows," Peter assured him. "He's defying us to find anything against John and Elsie, or his blood will be on our heads. It puts us at rather a deadlock."

"You said that you believed him," Jerry said tentatively. "Yet he told us that he'd lie if it suited his purpose. Do you really think he was telling the whole truth?"

"I don't think it's likely that he killed his wife, if that's what you mean," Peter answered. "His fear lest we discover something against one or other of the Lawrences shows that he's as much in the dark as we are—just as Harris's fear that Asbury might have done it after all shows that he's up a tree, too. There are an awful lot of people hanging around in this case, trying

to prove that somebody did or didn't murder Mrs. Cole, but none of them seems to know whether it would be the truth if it were proved."

"That man is capable of anything," Jerry insisted.

"Oh, yes, if he killed her in order to wipe out the scandal on the family name he'd take care to secure his own line of retreat. And that, you know, is exactly what did happen. Officially the case is closed with that verdict of 'party unknown,' and there you are. He couldn't have foreseen that a couple of reporters would get too goldarned interested in the story to let it die it's natural death. By the way, I hope you didn't mind my telling Cole that it was I who found him. He wasn't inclined to take you any too seriously as a prospective son-in-law, and I wanted to be impressive."

"It was you who were responsible really." Jerry turned to Peter with a look of shy admiration. "And you were ever so impressive!"

"Thanks," Peter laughed. "I had to be to stand up against a man like that. He belongs in the Renaissance. That's where Elsie gets her Borgia look—and her Borgia disposition, most likely. But that's just why I can't bring myself to think that Cole killed her—unless she pulled the gun on him and it was accidental. The old chap is a perfectionist in his way. He's rather gorgeous—nothing slapdash about him."

"You mean, if he were going to kill somebody he wouldn't do it so—crudely?"

"Precisely. He'd do it in the grand manner. The man has the single-minded fanaticism of the artist. He was driven inward on himself in morose taciturnity because to others he was the typical American of big business, while to himself his business was reared stone by stone to ultimate grandeur, like a cathedral. I've no doubt he dreamed of making the finest tyres in the world with the spirit of a Michael Angelo dreaming over his frescoes.

"He hewed life as the old sculptors hewed marble. He was for ever creating something in accordance with

a vision, giving himself utterly to the task of creation. His business was to stand as one perfect accomplishment, his family as another. If a man like that set out to create a murder you bet he'd do it beautifully! There'd have been nothing ugly or messy or sordid about it. Its lines would have been of an exquisite simplicity, which would point so clearly to the inference he chose that the Cole case would have been dismissed with an obituary in your bi-weekly Medbury *Gazette*.

"Are you going to put it in the paper—about finding Mr. Cole, I mean?"

"And have all the other papers wake up to the fact that here's a lot more to the Cole story than they thought? Not much! This story is going to be held for the big splash, and the pleasure will be all the *Herald's*. I tell you what I wish you'd do, Jerry. I've reached the stage where I'm simply yearning to make a list—sort out all that we've got so far and see what it adds up to. That'll make it easier to answer the well-known question, 'Where do we go from here?' Would you care to grab a sandwich with me and then go back to the office and work on it?"

"Sure, I'll come! Goodness knows, I'd be thinking about it anyway. It'll be a big help in figuring out what to do next."

Jerry's blue eyes were lit with enthusiasm. He was to be allowed to help his hero. Maybe, by following Peter about, he'd learn the job. It had recently become a matter of grave importance to Jerry that he should not be fired by the invisible and godlike Sears from his post as Medbury correspondent of the *Herald*. He was going to take care of Allison. Perhaps, if he worked a whole lot harder at Medbury, he'd sometime be given a chance in the main office. Remorsefully Jerry accused himself of failure to take his work very seriously in the past. But now he had Allison to work for!

The deserted local room was a place of huddled shadows where the desks with their covered typewriters crouched like animals asleep. A single light, with a

green shade, cast an uncertain circle of illumination from the ceiling. The floor, from which the day's accumulation of papers had been swept, had a curiously naked appearance, denuded of its customary clutter.

Peter switched on the light over his desk and kicked forward a chair for Jerry.

"I love this place at night," he said with one of his rare lapses into sentiment. "There's nothing quite like the emptiness and silence of a room that is usually bursting with clatter. It's as if the room took off its mask." Then, ashamed of his brief revelation of feeling for the work he loved, he briskly shoved a pad of copy paper in front of Jerry.

"Let's get busy," he said curtly. "First of all, we've got to remember that Kurtner, who knows more than all the rest of us put together, thinks she committed suicide—which would mean that all our grand psychological hunches are flops. Let's stick to the material evidence, pro and con. You begin, and I'll interrupt."

Jerry drew a perpendicular line down the centre of the page.

"On the pro side," he said thoughtfully, "there's the note found on her pillow, and the letter she wrote to Comstock, and the note she gave to that farm hand, Peters. They all read as if she might have contemplated taking her own life."

"And in answer we might say that they read as if she feared her life might be taken. But go ahead."

"Then there are her finger prints on the telephone receiver. She put in the call, and yet she replaced the telephone in the centre of the stand, showing no evidence of haste."

"That's a hard one—no answer. Go ahead."

"There's the position of the body, shown by the trajectory of the bullet. She must have been sitting down, if Kurtner was correct."

"Kurtner's always correct. It's a cinch the bullet went the way he said it did."

"And her crossed feet——"

"It's those crossed feet that worry me more than any other single thing. I just can't get around them. They bother me no end. Mark 'em down. What else?"

"There's the fact that she made a will the day before her death, leaving her ranch to Comstock."

"Yes, but the note she gave to Peters also refers to her property, and it was written weeks before she died. Those two cancel. It's the position of the body when the shot was fired, the position of the telephone, and the finger prints on the hanging telephone receiver that can't be explained except on the theory of suicide. But I've thought up a few cons. There's the blouse from the cleaner's—a woman wouldn't have her blouse cleaned if she knew that she was never going to wear it again. And there's Mrs. Cole's familiarity with fire-arms—it was a hunting gun, which she had used often, remember."

"I don't quite see——" Jerry looked up from his writing with a puzzled stare.

"Mrs. Cole was a fastidious person. She clung to the remnants of her beauty. Unless she had no idea what that shot would do to her, would she make herself into —the thing we saw? And she did know the effect of gunshot wounds. No matter whether she loved Asbury or hated him, she'd want the satisfaction of knowing that he would see her beautiful in death. And, by jiminy, she had the bottle of poison all the time—I'd almost forgotten that!"

"But if she wanted to accuse Asbury——" Jerry suggested dubiously.

"If she was as smart as all that, she could have scrawled a note that he poisoned her and taken the powders. But that's pure speculation, and we've got to stick to facts. There are those bruises and scratches on her arms. They would indicate a struggle—unless she got them in her earlier fracas with Asbury when she tried to keep him from leaving. I guess we'll have to regard them as open to either interpretation."

" And, of course, there's the telephone call—which side does that go on, do you think?" Jerry's pencil hovered hesitantly over the paper.

" That's non-committal too. On the face of it it indicates murder, yet it's the backbone of the suicide idea. She didn't scream, she didn't call for help, she took time to call ' operator ' several times—and she put the receiver back on the stand. On the other hand, if she committed suicide the telephone call can only be explained as an attempt to incriminate Asbury. Yet she left the accusation so indefinite that as a matter of fact Asbury got off scot-free. She left her revenge so uncertain and vague that she did not even mention his name. If we understood that telephone call we'd understand the whole business—and we don't."

" There's what she said about the gun, too," Jerry added. She did tell Comstock that she'd take her own life with it if need be, remember."

" Her own—and Asbury's, and that if anybody else who stood in the way. Well, that didn't happen. She wasn't thinking of a quiet suicide all by herself, but of a general mêlée, when she said that, and it sounds hysterical, anyway. She also did say that she would not be surprised if Asbury shot her. But we can't check on any of that. It doesn't get us anywhere."

" I've thought of one more pro," Jerry said. " Kurtner made quite a point of the orderliness of the room—no furniture knocked about, no signs of an attempt at escape from an attack."

" There's something queer about that. It's like something you're on the verge of remembering and can't." Peter was silent for a long moment, staring blankly at the green shade of the desk lamp. Then he sprang to his feet, kicking his chair violently backward. " By jiminy, it's as plain as the nose on your face! What a prize donkey I am! We've all gone along assuming that whatever happened was haphazard, on the spur of the moment. But if anybody was clever enough to kill Mrs. Cole in a way that would set us all

by the ears like this, it's a cinch he had his wits about him. He wouldn't leave any finger prints if he wore gloves—and even a newsboy nowadays would know enough to look out for finger prints if he were going to commit a murder. As for the furniture, it's so simple that it's downright ridiculous. All he had to do to efface the signs of a struggle was to put everything back exactly as he found it and then take himself off!"

## CHAPTER XLII

"If it was somebody else's hair, and we knew whose, it would be a clue, but if it was her own it isn't a clue at all, because it proves nothing either way." Peter addressed his empty coffee cup with argumentative fervour.

"Whatever are you talking about?" Barbara dropped her butter knife with a sharp clatter. "Please, Peter, don't go crazy. It would be so inconvenient. I prefer you in your right mind, such as it is. What about hairs? Whose hairs?"

"Mrs. Cole's, of course. I really am batty about this case, Barbara, for a fact. I wish I'd looked more closely at those micro-photographs. But if somebody else killed her, her hair might have blown across her hand, just as Kurtner said. The whole suicide case rests on a negative—the absence of evidence to the contrary. Listen here, Barbara. Will you drop things and ride down to the office with me?"

It was characteristic of Barbara that she raised no objections to be overthrown by Peter's insistence. She silently reconstructed her plans for the day and rose from the breakfast table.

"I'll slip into my suit and powder my nose while you get Bossy out of the garage," she said.

"You're a brick!" Peter's manner had a reckless buoyancy which Barbara had learned to view with a

wary eye. "There's just one little thing you can straighten out for me. Then I'm going out to Kurtner's house and have a heart-to-heart talk with him. We've got to work fast. Jimmy swears he'll take me off this story at the end of the week if I don't clear it up by then."

"Peter!" Barbara said challengingly. "When you rattle on like that it's because you have something up your sleeve that you know I won't like. What is it?"

But Peter declined to be crestfallen.

"Oh, it isn't much. But you're a small woman, Barbara."

Barbara leaned back in the seat of the car, surveying Peter with a mischievous smile on her uptilted face.

"Are you wondering whether you could overpower me single handed?" she asked. "You remember the Shakespearean lady of whom it was said, 'She's little, but she's fierce!'"

But Peter deferred explanations until Bossy had been angled into her stipulated place in the *Herald* parking lot. Then he turned to Barbara with the persuasively reasonable air of a small boy begging for candy.

"Barbara, you're a small woman, and so was Mrs. Cole. You're not a bit taller than she was. I've got the measurements of that stick in my pocket, and they'll have regulation .38 rifles at the hardware store. I want you to go over there with me and see whether you can sit on the floor with the gun on a table and reach the trigger with the stick. That's one of the points they argued about, but nobody settled it."

"Peter Piper!" Barbara gasped. "No wonder you wouldn't tell me what you wanted! You mean to say that you expect me to sit down on the floor of a hardware store with the end of a rifle in my mouth, while the customers neatly step over us? That is, if they don't send for the police to take us both to the psychopathic ward for observation!"

"But don't you see, it would prove it! At least, if you couldn't reach the trigger it would prove that suicide

was impossible. If you can, then it's another negative point, like the hairs. But I want to get that much cleared up before I go to Kurtner."

Barbara's head fell weakly back against the cushion. Her shoulders shook in a gale of irrepressible laughter. And Peter did not even see that it was funny! She wiped the tears from her eyes and turned to Peter, standing impatiently beside the car. She loved Peter because he was oblivious to absurdity when a point was to be gained. She loved him because he lost all sense of the ridiculous in pursuit of his object. She loved Peter because—he was Peter.

"Oh, my dear!" she protested feebly. "They'll think it's part of a movie. And it's all so serious, really."

"Of course it's serious," Peter said. "To tell the truth, I didn't think about the customers."

"You wouldn't. That's why you're such a darling."

"But if you really mind, I expect we could go up to the sports department on the second floor. I told Jerry to meet us at the Broadway entrance of the store at nine o'clock. I knew he wouldn't want to miss it."

"Nobody would want to miss it, as you've outlined the scene," Barbara agreed solemnly. "But the second floor would certainly be better for a private view."

Barbara tried very hard to look as if she did not belong to the group consisting of Peter, Jerry, and a salesman who waited with growing bewilderment while Peter, referring to the measurements on a slip of paper, first selected a gun and then crossed the aisle to paw over hammers and chisels until he discovered one the precise length of the stick of kindling wood. But Peter ignored the curiosity of spectators. With the gun under one arm and the hammer under the other he led the way up the stairs to the sporting goods department, which was providentially deserted at that hour.

"The counter is near enough to the height of the table," he said, measuring the distance from the floor with a yardstick purloined from the stock on the floor

below. " Now then! Sit down on the floor with your feet crossed and see if you can make it."

It was a strange setting for a burlesque of death. Barbara obediently sat on the floor, close to the gun laid diagonally across the counter. She glanced at the tennis rackets and golf sticks which filled the shelves along the walls—the implements of sport looking blindly down upon the implement of death. Unconsciously she shivered as the cold metal of the muzzle touched her lips. Peter and Jerry leaned breathlessly over the counter as she reached forward with the hammer—and touched the trigger.

Peter exhaled his pent breath in a heavy sigh of disappointment.

" It *would* be like that!" he said dispiritedly. " Well, that's another point for Kurtner. And yet it's like all the other points. It shows how it might have happened, and yet it doesn't rule out the possibility that it could have happened differently. I wonder now——" For a moment he stood dejectedly staring at Barbara, who had risen to her feet. Then his long face suddenly lightened in an irradiating smile.

" Look here, Barbara! We'll act it out on the other assumption. Pick up that gun. You've seized it, to protect yourself, to threaten me—it doesn't matter. I'm trying to get it away from you. We're fighting for it —both of us struggling with all our might."

With a sense of bizarre unreality, Barbara gripped the gun. Peter's tense face bent over her. His breath stirred her hair. He had forgotten that he was Peter, that she was Barbara. Her hat had slipped from her head and lay unregarded on the floor. Her fair hair fell forward across her eyes as the two swayed across the open space between the counters. Gradually Peter forced her back. The gun barrel twisted in her hands but she clung to it with the force of desperation. She forgot tennis rackets and the golf clubs. As the gun relentlessly turned under his slipping fingers, she was

a woman struggling for her life. She was on her knees now, still fighting.

"Lower! Lower!" Peter's voice was a husky whisper. "Now! Fall! Fall back on the floor!"

Barbara, flat on her back, laughed shakily and passed a trembling hand across her forehead.

"I wouldn't do that again for a million dollars—not even for you, Peter. It's too—too realistic."

In another moment Peter's hands had lifted her to her feet and his arms were around her.

"I'm sorry," he said penitently. And then penitence was forgotten as the air was rent by Peter's weird, lugubrious whistle—the banshee note of his triumph. The minor cadence was broken off in the middle as he turned to Jerry. "Did you see it? Did you see what happened? By jiminy, Barbara, you did it!"

"What, Peter, what?" Barbara clutched his arm, caught by the contagion of his uncontrollable excitement.

"By jiminy, Barbara, it happened," Peter reiterated in awestruck tones. "I pushed you back below the level of the table—you were bent backward, kneeling—the gun was parallel with the counter—and then you fell. And, Barbara, when you jerked backward to the floor your feet were crossed!"

Barbara glanced down at her feet, as if they belonged not to her but to that other woman, the woman who had been found dead on the floor of the ranch-house kitchen with her feet crossed.

"I remember now," she said faintly. "I don't know just how it happened, but they were."

"It doesn't prove anything, but it shows that something else was possible," Peter said softly. "And that something is happening, bit by bit, to all the physical evidence that looked so conclusive for suicide. I'm going out and lay the whole business before Kurtner. Something tells me that we're breaking ground—that there's another explanation for the telephone, for everything, and that we're going to find it."

## CHAPTER XLIII

EMIL KURTNER smiled somewhat frostily at Peter from behind his glittering eyeglasses.

"Oh, yes," he said, fingering the card in his hand. "I remember seeing you at the Cole inquest. You're the young man who disrespectfully referred to my strings as a cat's cradle and coupled my name with that of Mason in the joint appellation of super-sleuths."

"I know I've a lot to be forgiven for," Peter admitted with a disarming grin. "I rather liked the line about cat's cradles, myself, but I know it's hard to stand for being put in the same class with Mason, even in a newspaper. As a matter of fact, it's the Cole case that I hoped you'd let me talk to you about."

"We're all at the mercy of the newspapers—that's why I always decline to discuss my cases for publication."

"It isn't for publication," Peter assured him. "I know that your work on the case is finished, but mine isn't. Accepting every word of your testimony as absolute fact, there are still things about it that bother me. I've dug up a few little items that weren't known at the time of the inquest."

"If you have any new light on the matter I'd be glad to hear about it," Kurtner said, a new note of interest in his voice. "Come into my study. It's understood, of course, that all this is confidential—not an interview but a personal chat."

"You may have my word for that," Peter answered, and added whimsically, "that is, if you dare trust the word of a newspaper reporter when he's working on a story."

Kurtner glanced keenly at Peter's grinning countenance. What he saw there satisfied him, for he said: "I'll risk it."

Kurtner's study was devoid of any appointments

suggesting the laboratory of a criminologist. He had no need of properties to impress visitors with his claim to the title of super-sleuth which Peter had given him in the *Herald*. It was a small, neat office with book-lined walls, a table bare of papers, and two or three rather stiff-looking armchairs.

Peter drew one of the chairs forward and sat with both elbows propped on the table, watching Kurtner's slender, sensitive fingers toy with a paper knife as he leaned back in his chair behind the desk.

"I followed your reasoning at the inquest, and the facts you brought out are convincing. It's rather impudent of me not to be satisfied. But the thing that has worried me all along is another sort of fact—a stubborn psychological fact that stands in opposition to your conclusion based on the material evidence. Mrs. Cole's daughter insists, from her knowledge of her mother, that she could not have combined suicide with a plot of revenge against Asbury. Another very intelligent young woman—I'm married to her—holds the same view."

"I'm not so much interested in conclusions as in methods," Kurtner said dryly. "If the methods are sound the conclusions will take care of themselves. What you call psychological facts are and must be matters of opinion. However, I have an opinion of my own, though I don't in the nature of things give it evidential value."

"I'd be grateful if you'd tell me about it, all the same," Peter urged.

"I wonder if either of the young women you mentioned has had quite enough experience of the darker phases of human relationships to understand the true story of Asbury's connection with Natalie Cole." Kurtner stared at the point of the paper knife for a moment, and then went on. "Of the two, it is Asbury who has my pity."

"He got out of a bad mess very easily," Peter protested. "He seems to me a pretty poor sort, who, to say the least of it, has not behaved very admirably."

" He has not got off as easily as you think—or even as he thinks," Kurtner contradicted without heat. " And it isn't a question of behaving admirably. It's a matter of biology. Biologically, the woman is the aggressor."

" The gospel according to Bernard Shaw," Peter murmured.

But the reference was wasted on Kurtner.

" I've never read Shaw. However, it's true. Natalie Cole, in the beginning, was the pursuer. She required personal attention, emotional submission. It was as necessary to her existence as light and air. She did not get it from her husband, so she was impelled to seek it elsewhere, as inevitably as a heliotropic organism is impelled to turn toward the light. Asbury at the time was young—and the young man who could have resisted the determined appeal of a woman of Mrs. Cole's type is very rare. We speak of the dangers confronting innocent young girls—but the men who are led into irresistible temptation by older women far outnumber the girls who succumb to the pursuit of men.

" But once the relationship was established the tables were turned. The balance of equilibrium between the sexes is so delicate that once aroused, the man assumes the position of power. For a time, Asbury gave Mrs. Cole the attention she craved. He accepted financial support from her because that was the easiest thing to do. At least for a time he did not have the strength or the brains to seek an alternative. But the time came when the young man found his emotional bondage intolerable. The initial power which Mrs. Cole had wielded over him was spent. The glamour of pursuit had faded. He turned from her to seek companionship of his own age—and she had no further weapons with which to combat that relentless withdrawal.

" She accused him of disloyalty and ingratitude—but there was neither gratitude nor loyalty involved in their relation. She had taken what she wanted. Now the time had come when he would take what he wanted—his release. That had become his deepest need, and neither

bribes nor allure could prevail against it. She would not admit it—but she knew it, and the knowledge made her efforts both pitiful and frantic.

" She tried to isolate him on the ranch—she tried to restore her beauty; for love was necessary to her existence, and having lost Asbury she lost everything. Hence her extremes of exaltation and depression. She must either possess him or crush him. She would possess him alive or dead—if not by holding him, then by extinguishing him.

" Her growing despondency reached its climax on the evening when she had tried physically to keep him from leaving the ranch to go to Winifred Newell. Then, at last, she admitted defeat. In a certain sense, in her own frenzied mind, it was quite true that Asbury was responsible for her death—that his repudiation was killing her. It was that ambiguous truth which she told in her telephone message, before she fired the shot."

Peter digested this explanation in silence for a moment. Then his face set in an expression of dogged resistance.

"All right, that's one explanation, I'll grant," he said. " But I can't help saying, ' *if* she fired the shot.' Do you mind looking round the corner and taking in that possibility? There are some other people present but not accounted for. I can't rest comfortably until they are eliminated."

" There was no evidence of the presence of a second person in the room," Kurtner reminded him.

" No, but Asbury was not the only visitor at the ranch that night. That's one of the things I found out. In fact, there are four others with motive, opportunity, and disposition to kill Mrs. Cole."

" I'm perfectly willing to consider any new facts. They can't obliterate the facts that are already there."

There was a shade of eagerness in Kurtner's manner. He felt no resentment at Peter's questioning. He had spoken truly when he said that he let conclusions take care of themselves, for he held them, not as emotional

beliefs, but as the end-point of a series of inescapable inferences. The superstructure was unimportant, so long as each brick was properly laid. And if Peter had new bricks to place in his hands he would take the intellectualist's keen delight in fitting them into position.

" The worst of it is that there are so many of them—they didn't all do it, and yet one of them is about as likely as another," Peter said. " In the first place, there's Comstock. The new fact about Comstock is that he told me himself that he might have killed Mrs. Cole. He could not remember what happened that night, but it looks as if the idea might have taken such hold on him—a hold so firm that he wrote me a letter giving it as the reason for his suicide—because it was a subconscious memory of what really happened.

" Comstock was already driven to the verge of a breakdown by despair over his financial situation. He would not have deliberately killed Mrs. Cole for the sake of the financial security she had just held out to him in the event of her death. But the effect of a dangerous amount of liquor on a system totally unused to it was to make him for the time being completely out of his head. He knew that Mrs. Cole had the gun. He might even have gone to the house while she was away and have taken it, with the idea of preventing her from using it—she had made some rather wild threats to him of shooting both Asbury and herself. Then, while Allison was in the orchard, he could walk across the road to the ranch house.

" Mrs. Cole might at first have taken him for Asbury, when she saw him in the doorway with the gun, and have telephoned in real terror of her life. Then, reassured when she recognised her old friend, she set the telephone back on the stand—only to find in another instant that she was facing, not the Comstock she knew, but a temporary maniac. Comstock killed her, mechanically wiped his finger-prints from the gun—the good old subconscious taking care of him there—and then, in his

crazed state, flung it from him, where it hit the door before it fell.

" He was too dazed to notice the hanging telephone receiver and the stick which Mrs. Cole had seized from the wood-box in a futile effort at self-defence when she realised that she was in danger from Comstock. He then ran from the house. Nobody ever thought of examining his clothes for bloodstains. He could easily have washed or burned them. When he woke the next morning he remembered nothing. But something buried deeper than memory remembered. I know for a fact that it was the goading of that self-suspicion which caused him to take his own life."

Kurtner's fingers were no longer playing with the paper-knife. He leaned forward, surveying Peter with the pleased surprise of a professor who has just discovered signs of unusual promise in a hitherto unregarded pupil.

" Young man, that is a neat chain of reasoning, very neat," he said, and Peter was conscious that the adjective on Kurtner's lips conveyed a high compliment. " The only trouble with it is that it is not reinforced by a single item of positive evidence."

" I know," Peter acknowledged. " But that's the trouble with so many murders. The man who plans to cover his tracks often leaves some hint of the covering process for people like you to discover. But in a chain of accidents, where the end is unconsidered, the perpetrator just accidentally doesn't leave any positive evidence behind him."

" Your idea interests me," Kurtner said. " It interests me so much that I greatly wish Comstock were still alive."

" I'm not sure that I do," said Peter. " I'm rather glad that he's out of our reach."

## CHAPTER XLIV

"AND the other new facts?" Kurtner inquired.

"Well, there were the marks of several cars on the driveway in front of the house. One of them belonged to Clarkson Cole. Cole came secretly to try to force his wife to return to him. He has been hiding under an assumed name in a hotel ever since. I talked to him last night. He had motive and opportunity, and a disposition quite equal to the occasion. The only thing is, he said that Mrs. Cole was already dead when he arrived."

"I know something of Clarkson Cole. The best defence he has is his flight," Kurtner said with a return of his old dictatorial manner. "Clarkson Cole is anything but a fool. He would never lay himself open to such grave suspicion as his hiding was sure to incur if he had anything personally to fear from discovery."

"Yes, but he was afraid to tell the truth, for all that. Here's another of those facts that help to confuse the issue."

"Facts never confuse the issue," Kurtner declared. "The confusion lies in our ignorance of their exact place in the pattern of events. Let us get all the facts about the Cole family together and see where they lead us."

"They haven't led me anywhere at all,' Peter confessed. "But there was a bitter triangular feud between Mrs. Cole, her daughter Elsie, and Elsie's husband, John Lawrence."

Kurtner seized upon Peter's statement with the delight of a naturalist who has just succeeded in identifying a rare specimen.

"I've been interested in Mr. Lawrence," he said. "His manner at the inquest roused my curiosity."

"There's no direct evidence against John and Elsie Lawrence either," Peter admitted. "But if it was not

fear for himself it was fear for them that kept Clarkson Cole secreted in the offing, afraid either to leave the scene altogether or to come into the open. Elsie Lawrence is an incorrigible flirt. She plays the game for the excitement there is in it, but she has no notion of paying for her fun. She and Asbury played up to each other. I don't know how far the affair went—there's not a moral scruple in the whole bunch of them. But Mrs. Cole was madly jealous and laid a trap which they fell into.

" John Lawrence felt that he had been duped, and put the whole blame on Mrs. Cole, not only for Asbury's presence but for everything in Elsie that he fought against but could not tear himself away from. When Elsie found that her mother's jealousy threatened to turn her playing with fire into a raging conflagration in which she herself was in danger of being burned, she turned against Mrs. Cole with all the vindictiveness of her outraged self-worship.

" There you have them, three consuming egoists who recognised no law that conflicted with their own ends. I don't say that either of them would have returned for the purpose of killing Mrs. Cole. But either, or both, might have renewed the conflict. Elsie might have demanded that her mother withdraw her accusations, and have gone wild if she refused to retract them. If you saw the look that John gave to Asbury at the inquest, I think you'll admit that no life would be allowed to stand in the way of his rage. No one has checked the movements of either of them on the night of Mrs. Cole's death. But Elsie, you remember, fainted at the sight of the clothes her mother was wearing. And Lawrence's attitude was not that of a mere family representative."

" Yet there's not an iota of proof against any of them—except Mr. Cole's presence on the scene, which, I admit, damages the simplicity of the problem. Granting that any one of the three might have done it, you are as far as ever from demonstrating that one of them did," Kurtner warned.

"I know it. That's why I wanted you to go back over the ground with me," Peter answered.

"My ground has nothing to do with speculation," Kurtner said. "The investigation of a crime has certain points in common with the writing of a news story. There are the same questions to be answered: What, where, when, how, why, and finally, who? You have focused your attention on the last question: Who did it? But that is not the starting point. In his case the where, the how, and the when are already determined. A lawyer would concentrate on the why, the question of motive. But I began at the end-point of the action. My efforts were limited to determining precisely what happened.

"I am not drawing any fancy free-hand pictures. Every point in the diagram is determined by the material facts. And there is no material fact to point to the presence of a second person in the room at the time when Mrs. Cole met her death. Not one of the new facts which you have brought to my attention changes the picture. In the absence of evidence to the contrary we are bound to assume that the obvious happened."

"But suppose the obvious didn't happen?" Peter asked.

"If it happened, it will become obvious," Kurtner retorted.

"I wish it would," Peter said wistfully. "But there's one thing that might be a good deal more obvious than it is, and that is Asbury's connection with the whole business. If Asbury is innocent he has contrived to tangle things up considerably, all the same. In the first place, he told two different stories. He denied that he had been at the ranch at all, until I faced him with the proof to the contrary. Then he admitted that he had been there, and that they had quarrelled.

"Mrs. Cole was madly jealous of his association with other women. She even tried to ruin his business. You say yourself that he wanted desperately to get rid of her. Suppose he realised that the only way to prevent

her interference with his affairs was to put her out of the way altogether. He has not shown the slightest sign of regret at her death, though you might think he would remember what she had once been to him and feel a human sorrow and remorse at so terrible an end."

"That last is quite true. Asbury is not overburdened with imagination or deep feeling. His main sentiment is relief. He's out from under, and he doesn't care much how it happened. He does not know that his punishment is yet to come—and is surely on the way."

"But didn't you know? He was released immediately after the verdict!" Peter exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes, and this rather crude, superficially attractive, selfish, and commonplace young man will be haunted by tragedy all the rest of his life, although he has not yet had time to realise it."

"You mean—somebody is going to keep after him?"

"Life is going to keep after him. And whatever he deserves, he does not deserve all that he will get. He is a shallow person—and Natalie Cole has had her revenge, for he will be plunged into depths not of his own choosing. He will be ostracised and utterly lonely. The story will follow him wherever he goes. He was born to lead a perfectly normal, uninteresting life, kidding the girls along with his masterful ways, and finally marrying one of them. But no girl will ever idealise him now—and the women who marry us always idealise us. He is facing the situation now with the bravado of an undeveloped youth, but bravado is not a lasting prop for a man's life. It might have been better for him if he had been tried and convicted for the murder of Natalie Cole."

"You do suspect him, then?" Peter asked eagerly.

"I know that he did not do it," Kurtner said with calm conviction.

"Of course, I know he has an alibi, but there's something funny about that," Peter went on. "He has two alibis, and that's one too many. I'd like mighty well to know whether that old man on the road really saw him, and why Harris was so anxious to make out that Rutters

was mistaken. If he was not mistaken, why didn't Asbury tell about Mrs. Newell in the first place? Certainly he did not keep still out of chivalry."

"No," Kurtner agreed, "I know that Asbury did not shoot Mrs. Cole, but as long as you are in the region of speculation, has it occurred to you that the second alibi might be false?"

"By jiminy!" Amazement and chagrin were mingled on Peter's astonished face. "By jiminy, I never thought of that! Then—he might have——"

"He might have, but he didn't kill Mrs. Cole, for all that."

"You are sure—you have reason to be certain?"

"I have a far better reason than belief in alibis, which are notoriously shifty things. I have three incontrovertible facts. Here they are." Kurtner leaned forward and opened the drawer of the table. From it he took a small box and tossed out three small round objects which rolled across the smooth wood and finally spun to rest.

"Buttons!" Peter cried.

"Yes, buttons. It was not necessary to produce them at the inquest, but here they are. Don't you remember that the buttons were torn off Asbury's shirt? They came off in the fracas and rolled into various corners of the room, where I found them. There is blood on them."

"But——"

"Just a moment," Kurtner raised his hand. "There is blood on them, and the blood in each instance is on the back—that is, the side which was next the cloth when it was attached to the shirt. All three buttons happened to roll face downward on the floor. If the blood had spattered on them before they were torn off it would have been found on the face, not the back, of each button. And remember that there was no blood on the shirt itself. It is therefore evident that the buttons had already been torn from the shirt and were lying on the floor when they caught some of the shower of Mrs. Cole's blood at the moment when she was killed.

"Mason was talking absolute nonsense when he said

that any one could have fired the shot without receiving some of the blood on his clothing. Yet Asbury later in the evening wore the same shirt which he wore when he quarrelled with Mrs. Cole, the shirt from which these buttons were ripped.

" I have examined that shirt myself, and Mrs. Newell told the truth when she said that there were no stains on it—neither had any part of it been washed. He was still wearing it, in fact, when the sheriff called to tell him of Mrs. Cole's death. If he had killed Mrs. Cole he would have changed his shirt and have hunted high and low for the missing buttons before I got there. Instead, he left them on the floor to prove the truth of his own story of the quarrel earlier in the evening."

Peter lifted the buttons one by one and held them close to his eyes. Tiny dark spots, no larger than fly specks, were still visible on their under sides.

" There's just one thing more," he said at last, " and I haven't the ghost of an idea what it means, or whether it means anything. But there was nothing like it among Mrs. Cole's belongings, nor in Allison's, and Jerry found out for me from Mrs. Lawrence's maid that she has nothing like it, either. And Mrs. Cole had no women callers—the neighbours held too much aloof from her for that. I would never have found it if it weren't for being nearsighted. In order to see things clearly I have to make an effort to observe, so I've got into the habit of going after things closely when I don't want to miss anything."

He drew an envelope from his inner pocket. The envelope contained a folded strip of paper, and between the folds lay a single thread of rose-coloured crinkly silk.

" You found this—where?" Kurtner asked sharply.

" Caught in a roughened splintery place on the leg of the table in the kitchen. The table was new and unpainted. Mrs. Cole had bought it only recently and intended to enamel it, Allison says. It's such a little thing—and yet it bothers me."

" Little!" Kurtner's eyes blazed behind their shining

lenses. " It is the biggest thing in the world. It is a fact. An objective fact—and the only piece of positive evidence that a second person, unknown to Allison Cole, was at some time in that room. It alters the entire picture. I told you that we must believe the obvious. I care nothing for theories—they are only the pattern made by facts. Asbury's curiously conflicting alibis fit into that pattern—they will have to fit into it. Young man, if you find out the truth about those alibis, and where that rose-coloured thread came from, everything else will come tumbling into place. Heretofore the known facts were consistent with suicide and with no other explanation, because there were no other facts to contradict them. Your bit of silk thread is the contradicting fact. Find out how it fits into events at the ranch house that night and you will know the answer to every question about the Cole case."

## CHAPTER XLV

PETER wasted as few as possible of his precious hours in covering the road to Medbury. Bossy's hoarse honk gave brief warning of his approach to hairpin curves without slackening of speed, and his progress was marked by a trail of squawking chickens and indignant truck drivers. Jerry, who occupied the seat beside him, accepted bumps which lifted his head to the lining of the top of the car, and refrained from comment.

" Tell me when we get to the side road Rutters took to get to his place," Peter shouted against the wind without removing his gaze from the fluttering ribbon of highway which unwound before Bossy's spinning wheels.

At intervals Jerry uttered a word of warning.

" Slow down here," he said as they approached a village. " This town makes all its expenses out of fines to motorists."

Peter obediently removed his foot from the accelerator.

In the reduction of speed to twenty miles an hour as they passed through the main street Bossy seemed to be barely creeping.

" We're coming to it now," Jerry said at last. " It's a narrow little country road to the left. You can miss it easily if you don't watch out."

Bossy's pace became necessarily more conservative as they felt their way along the ruts of a road that led from the main highway into the hills.

" Where does this go to, anyway?" Peter asked. " It's hardly more than a lane. We haven't passed a house for miles."

" Nobody lives out this way except old Rutters. That's what makes it so queer that he met a car coming in the other direction," Jerry answered. " It's called the old Cumberville road, but the Cumberville place has been empty for years. The heirs are all scattered and in the East, and there's been one of those interminable estate litigations over the division of the property. The land is too hilly for cultivation, but Rutters has a goat farm and uses the hills for range. He doesn't make much of a living out of it, but he sells the goats' milk to a sanatorium and manages to get along."

" I'd like to put you down before a census of Medbury county and see if you couldn't tell the life history of every man, woman, and child in it," Peter said. " I'm all ears for local biography. You spoke of the Cumberville place being empty. Does that mean there's a house?"

" Yes, about a mile off the road, up a side lane. The original Cumberville built it as a sort of wilderness retreat. But it's falling to pieces now. There hasn't even been a caretaker there for as long as I can remember. When we were children we thought it was haunted, just because it looked as if it ought to be."

" But if a car was on this road and was not going to or from the Rutters house, there wouldn't be any other place it could have been to except the deserted Cumberville house, would there?" Peter asked.

" Unless it had taken the wrong turning and got on this road by mistake," Jerry suggested.

" Yes, that's possible—if the car belonged to a stranger," Peter admitted. " But if Rutters was correct in thinking it was Asbury he saw, Asbury knows the roads too well to get lost."

" Only there's no reason why Asbury, or any one else, should go to the Cumberville place. There's nothing and nobody there. It isn't even picturesque enough to be a ruin, and it's too hard to get to to be used for petting parties."

" Still and all, we've got to do a thorough job of eliminating, as Kurtner says, though I agree with you that Asbury wouldn't have come all this way for a petting party—there are too many locations nearer home. But I just feel inquisitive about it. After all, Rutters was positive that he saw Asbury, and he had no motive for lying."

The turn-off to the narrow lane was an almost indistinguishable opening among the trees and bushes that grew in a wild tangle close to the side of the road. There was barely room for Bossy to nose her way along the tortuous curves that led them almost instantly out of sight of the road. They had bumped along for perhaps half a mile when Peter suddenly put his foot on the brake and stopped his engine. In another moment he had leaped over the edge of the door in front of the car, staring at the ground.

" Jerry," he said solemnly, " I'm an ass. Here I went bumbling along and didn't have the sense to notice what was right under my feet."

Jerry peered over the side of the car and followed the direction of Peter's transfixed gaze. But he could see nothing except the twisted, deserted lane with its border of thickets.

" What is it?" he asked. " Have you found something?"

" Only what was here all along," Peter said in accents of acute disgust. " You told me that this lane is never

used. Yet look here! There isn't a weed or a blade of grass growing anywhere on it. And I drove half a mile before I noticed it!" He dropped to his knees in the dirt, peering with his bright, nearsighted eyes close to the earth. Without raising his head, he fumbled in his pocket and brought out a crumpled sheet of copy paper. Then his voice was lifted in a shout of delighted discovery.

"Whoopee, Jerry! Come here! Look!"

Jerry flung himself from the car and stood beside Peter, who thrust the paper toward him with one hand, pointing at the tracks in the road with the other.

"There's the drawing I made of the tread of Asbury's La Salle. And here's the same pattern in the dirt—not once, but many times. See, it's repeated over and over. Asbury's car didn't merely pass this way once. It's come so often that it's worn off every trace of green from the lane. Come on, let's go. My curiosity about the haunted mansion of the Cumbervilles is mounting every minute."

Peter's plaintive whistle rent the air as he jumped into the car. It continued without cessation its reiterated phrase in a lamenting minor key as Bossy jolted over the remaining half-mile to the house, while Jerry gritted his teeth. At last whistle and car stopped together as they reached a clearing, partially overgrown with weeds, brambles, and seedling shoots.

The forest was silently, gradually feeling its way forward to reclaim the territory briefly filched from it by a man long dead. The house faced them with shut eyes. There was no glimmer of glass from its windows, which were boarded over with heavy planks. The chimney sagged like a tired old woman no longer able to stand erect.

Peter ran forward, stumbling through the weeds, and mounted the steps from which the paint had almost entirely scaled away, leaving a few discoloured, scablike patches. He examined the doors and windows closely and pressed his nose against the cracks between the

boards in a vain endeavour to obtain a squinting glance at the dark interior. Then he moved around to the back, with Jerry following close at his heels.

"I'll bet you were the kind of kid that came out here, scared to death, to look at the place just because it was supposed to be haunted," he remarked over his shoulder.

"Well, yes, I did," Jerry confessed with an embarrassed laugh. "It was on a dare—they said I'd be afraid to do it, so I thought I had to."

"And did it look just as it does now?" Peter asked with suppressed excitement.

"Exactly. I remember I tried to break in, in a spirit of bravado, and I was inwardly very much relieved that it was all boarded up so that I couldn't."

"And the family haven't sent any one out to make repairs or anything since?"

"I'm sure they haven't. They're only distant cousins of old Cumberville. They don't care anything about the house, and the land would have been sold for whatever it would bring if it weren't tied up in one of those intricate family feuds."

"Yet look at these boards." Peter laid his hand on a heavy plank nailed across one of the windows. "The house is weather-beaten, but the boards aren't. That's fairly new lumber. And the nail-heads—see that? They aren't even rusted. And here at the back door the boarding is secured to the wall by a padlock. It's a good strong padlock. What's more, it's a bright and shining padlock. I'd give a cooky to get in somehow, but something tells me that it can't be done."

"You mean that Asbury has had all this done—that he's been using the house for something? But what on earth could he have been doing?"

"We'd know if we could get in, but we can't. However, I've sort of a dim inkling—and it's going to be a lot clearer when I've had a little interview with him. We haven't the time to do any real housebreaking. The main thing is that the alibi Asbury took such pains to dodge is established. The next question is why he was

so eager to dodge it, and how he persuaded Winifred Newell to provide him with a substitute. Hop in, Jerry! We're going to get the answer to that, and get it before we're a day older."

All the way back to town Jerry, his teeth on edge, was forced to listen to ten shrill and melancholy notes that journeyed endlessly back and forth in a single woeful fragment of unfinished tune.

"Hoo-oo-oo, hu-hu-hu-hoo," whistled Peter.

## CHAPTER XLVI

Asbury sat in the dingy little office made by partitioning off a corner of the floor space where huge, top-heavy covered vans were drawn up in rows, like houses fronting a narrow street. His elbows were propped on the desk, and his head rested on his clenched hands.

He had resolved, almost without thinking about it, to face things out in Medbury. It was natural for him to meet the situation with a debonair insouciance—in fact, it had hardly occurred to him that there was still a situation to be met, after Rondel and Harris, with a few words of congratulation, had released him from arrest. The arrest itself had been almost nominal. Harris had insisted all along that it was merely a gesture, not to be taken seriously. The inquest over, he would simply return to his old life—return to it on more pleasant terms than before, since the only serious problem he had ever been forced to meet had been so unexpectedly and completely settled by Natalie's death.

He was free! His physical freedom was a minor matter, since he had never been seriously worried by the possibility of facing trial for Natalie's death. Harris would see to that. He was free of Natalie, free to take up life as if he had never met her. Of course he would stay in Medbury. He was making a good living for himself for the first time, and there was satisfaction,

born of unconscious pride, in his independence. In another town, with the support of Harris withdrawn, he would have to start all over again as a common labourer in a strange place—and he had grown accustomed to material comforts during the years when Natalie had supplied all his wants.

But somehow, things had not slipped back into their expected groove. Winnie Newell had left her position in the office and had gone back to her husband.

" It won't do for us to be seen around together after this," she had said with unshakable decision, meeting his arguments, of both personal and business nature. with a chill, " Don't be silly."

He had found it inexplicably difficult to find any one to take her place. There had been several answers to his advertisement in the Medbury *Gazette,* but when they learned the name of their prospective employer the young women who called had telephoned or written that they had made other plans.

One, franker than the others, had said: " Mother won't let me work for you, Mr. Asbury."

Of course he could get somebody down from the city easily enough, Asbury told himself. But in the interim he had been forced to conduct his own correspondence and bookkeeping, and he was far from expert in either branch of business activity. A vague loneliness and self-pity took possession of him as he laboriously picked out typewriter keys with two fingers and chewed the end of his pencil when columns of figures showed a temperamental unwillingness to check.

When he flung the books from him and set out in quest of a friendly game of pool or poker, it was surprisingly hard to find any one who wanted to play. Asbury had the reputation of being a good fellow, with plenty of casual acquaintances. They had not been repelled by his relation with Mrs. Cole. They had even twitted him with ribald good nature on his predicament with " the missus." But they had turned away, with the solidarity of the pack, from the man who was

involved in what they called a " jam " which was outside their easy acceptance of normal entanglements.

To be the prey of a jealous woman was one thing—but to be mixed up in that woman's violent death was another. There was " something fishy " about it. That Asbury had been legally absolved of any connection with her death did not affect the attitude of Medbury. It was an attitude based on obscure feelings and prejudices, not on reason, and it expressed itself in a shrinking from Asbury, an unanalysed removal of him from the herd. Medbury passed its own verdict, and that verdict was that " things had gone too far."

Asbury was roused by a brisk knock at the door, immediately followed by the turning of the knob. He instantly dropped his hands from his head and pretended to be absorbed in the untidy mass of papers on the table —but the movement had not been quick enough to escape Peter's observation.

Peter had very little respect for Asbury. He reacted with the youthful impatience of a keen and competent mind to the befuddlement of an inferior intelligence. But at sight of those quickly dropped hands he felt a sharp prick of human sympathy. Asbury was getting more than he had bargained for, and he was helpless to understand why. Yet he kept a stiff upper lip, turning a bold front to the world, and Peter paid tribute to that rudimentary courage.

" You remember me, don't you?" he asked, dropping into a chair.

" I remember you all right," Asbury said grudgingly. " What do you want?"

" I've come to offer some more good advice," Peter said, ignoring the lack of cordiality in his reception.

" I don't want any advice from you or anybody else. I've had enough. All I want is to be let alone."

" Well, I persuaded you once to tell the truth, and it was a good move. I think a little more of the same might be helpful. You're being let alone now a good deal more than is quite cheering."

" I'm not kicking," Asbury said stubbornly.

" No, and that's a credit mark for you. But things didn't drop back into their familiar places the way you expected after the inquest, did they?"

" What business is it of yours?" Asbury stared inimically at Peter across the table.

" We'll take that as a purely rhetorical question," Peter grinned. " I'll answer my own question instead of yours. The people in this town don't give a hoot about legal decisions—maybe that shows they're brighter than the law. They know that there's still a mystery about this affair, and mystery makes them uncomfortable. You're up against the pack, Asbury, and you're not built to enjoy standing alone in a martyr's pose. The best thing in the world for you would be to have it all straightened out. That's the only way it will ever be forgotten."

" But I can't straighten it out—I don't know a thing about it more than I've told!" Beneath the roughness of Asbury's tone there was a note of pleading.

" I know you can't, but I think I can." Peter gazed straight into Asbury's sullen eyes with steady friendliness. " Would you like to have me do it?"

" My God, I would!" The words came with an explosive vehemence. Asbury's defences crumbled before Peter's sincerity. He was tired of it all—deadly tired of it. It was too much for him to handle. Once before this chap from the newspaper had beaten down his reluctance and distrust—and he had been right then. Maybe he was right now. With a gesture of surrender he opened his hands, palm upward, on the table.

" I'm beat," he said. " I'm sick of all this jockeying around and getting tied into knots. It hasn't got me anywhere. If you've got any ideas, spill 'em."

" Well, in the first place," Peter said, his gray eyes beaming with a smile of confidence. " I'm not throwing any rocks at your bootlegging business. It's very good stuff, and for that may the Lord make us truly grateful. But it was unfortunate that you could not

reveal where you were at the time Mrs. Cole was being killed. You had a real alibi, and you had to cover it with a false one because, in addition to needing an alibi for the ranch, you also had to have one for the Cumberville place, where you had gone to superintend the storing of a load of hootch. That complicated matters unduly."

The instantaneous narrowing of Asbury's eyes to wary slits told Peter that his shot had struck home. Asbury opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and relapsed into stubborn silence.

"That's all right," Peter went on, as if Asbury had spoken. "You were playing the game in not giving anything away—especially when your partner in the game was the chief of police, who could find several ways of making trouble for you."

"It wasn't——" Asbury began indignantly, and checked himself.

"No, I don't think it was fear of Harris that made you hold tight. You're not that kind of a coward. You wouldn't squeal. You were living up to your own code of business ethics, such as it is, and squealing is the worst violation of that code. I'm not engaged in hunting up evidence for the prohis. That's their job, and I'll leave them to it. The only point now is, that I know where you were on the night of September tenth. I haven't the slightest intention of telling any one of my Cumberville find. Do you believe me?"

Peter returned Asbury's long, questioning stare with nonchalant indifference.

"Yes, I believe you," Asbury said reluctantly. "I guess you have the goods on me. That's where I was, all right."

"Then how did you induce Winifred Newell to give you that other alibi—and why didn't you come out with it in the first place?"

"I didn't come out with it in the beginning because I didn't have it then. And I didn't induce her to give it to me. She came to me herself and suggested it." Asbury's words came with a rush. It was a relief to

let it out at last, to release his own pent-up bewilderment and throw the burden of it upon another person.

"You didn't persuade her to do it for you out of—shall we say, affection?" Peter prodded.

"Say, do you suppose she'd bother to lie, and risk being found out, for me?" Asbury said with bitter sarcasm. "I'll say she wouldn't! We were just playing around, and both of us knew it."

"Then why did she subject her reputation to considerable strain and put herself in the wrong with her husband just to make things easier for you?"

"It was all a surprise to me, I'm telling you," Asbury said earnestly. "She talked me into it, and it looked as if it would be a good turn for both of us. She asked me if I had a good airtight alibi for that night, and I told her I hadn't. She could see that I was troubled about it. Then she suggested this yarn, because she needed an alibi herself, and the same one would do for the two of us. She was out with another guy that night, and she was afraid her husband had got wind of it. It would be a whole lot worse for him to find out where she really was than to give him that story about my calling for her at the office. There was nothing serious between Winnie and me, you understand. But if her husband ever found out about this other guy there'd be all hell popping, and she knew his suspicions were already roused. She even thought Gus had got somebody to shadow them. And the last thing in the world Winnie wanted was to be on the wrong side of a divorce case and lose Gus as her anchor to windward."

## CHAPTER XLVII

PETER'S pipe had gone out. Nevertheless, he continued to suck methodically at the stem, quite unconscious that his efforts were without result. He sat in his hotel bedroom, as he had sat for the last hour, his shoulders hunched forward, his feet elevated to the bed rail, gazing

fixedly at a single crinkly rose-coloured silk thread which lay in the crease of a slip of paper held in his hand.

Peter's attitude was one of settled despondency, and his long face was fixed in an expression of dreary hopelessness. Peter rather wished that he were a dog, so that he might at least have the satisfaction of howling. He thought he knew exactly how a dog felt when it howled —a draggled sort of dog, stretched on the step in front of a locked door that refused to open for all its insistent scratchings.

Peter had been scratching at that locked door for most of the night. It was his last day, and the door still presented a blank, impenetrable front. His mind had padded round and round in repeated circles. He had to break through that circle somehow—break clean through to the outside. Perhaps it had been a mistake to come to Medbury at all. Perhaps he should have let the question of Asbury's alibi go and have concentrated on checking Mrs. Lawrence's wardrobe more thoroughly. After all, a maid might very well be mistaken—or bribed. But it was too late now. If he had taken the wrong turning there was no time left to retrace his steps.

At the moment, Peter was not thinking of Jimmy, or of the *Herald* as he stared into the face of failure. He had wasted the *Herald's* time and had fallen down on the story, but Peter's jaunty self-confidence was not rooted in personal vanity. He could shrug his shoulders and say, " That's that." There would be other stories. But he had let Allison and Jerry have faith in him. He had appealed to their faith, and they had believed in him. They were so young! They belonged in the sunshine. He did not want the shadow of mystery to lie across the path those two young things were taking together. And now the shadow would be there always, and it would be a darker shadow because Peter Piper had tried to lift it—and failed.

The worst of it—the very worst of it—was, that all the pieces were in his hands, if only he could arrange

them so that they had a meaning. It was like those cut-up puzzles; all you had to do was to put them together in the right order to make a picture. It was like trying to remember a word that lay just below the level of consciousness. You tried and tried, and it eluded you, though you knew that if you could only force it to emerge you could hardly believe that you'd been so stupid as not to recognise it all along. His mind tramped back and forth, back and forth, over the same well-worn ground. He had to get off that beaten track somehow, push himself over the edge—and he couldn't.

Men's acts left a trail behind them, like the peas dropped by the child in the fairy tale. Peter held the peas in his hand. One had to assume that they were all dropped along one path. Only they weren't. There was no single clearly-defined road to follow, traced by some one who knew what he intended to do and then did it. It was simply impossible that each of those contradictory clues was the visible trace of a real act.

Ah, there was the rub! Those material bits of evidence took no account of a change of mind. Sometimes traces might be left, not of what one had done, but only of what one had meant to do. There drifted across Peter's tired mind the incongruous, silly lines of a limerick about " a young man from Ostend, who did what he didn't intend."

Take the evidences of suicide, for example. The poison found in Mrs. Cole's room clearly indicated that she had really thought of committing suicide. Yet she had not taken the poison. And the note left on her pillow—was that merely the sign of another baulked intention? She had threatened to kill herself and Asbury together. Perhaps she had meant to do it that night, when she sent for him to come to the ranch. Perhaps that was what she meant by the words about something happening to her. When she made the will on the day before her death she might indeed have been leaving a record of her resolution to end it all by a last violent act in her violent life. And then something intervened,

but the traces remained. Only they were not clues to what had happened, but only to what Mrs. Cole thought was going to happen.

Suppose that John and Elsie Lawrence were both innocent. Could their conduct also be explained, not in terms of overt acts, but of what had reality only in their own minds? John's hatred of Asbury dominated everything else about him. Perhaps he had really believed in Asbury's guilt—because he had wanted him to be guilty. His guilt would at the same time justify John's hate and slake his lust for vengeance. That hate had been intensified and doubled because it could not be divided with Elsie. He could not hate Elsie, no matter what she did—her fascination for him was too strong. She baffled and attracted him at the same time, because she was the one person whose will evaded him, whom he could never hope to conquer.

But that determined belief in Asbury's guilt, might it not conceal another and hidden fear? Only by hammering on his conviction that Asbury killed Mrs. Cole could he be altogether sure that Elsie herself had not done it. And Elsie? Perhaps the hidden, subconscious fear haunted her also. No wonder she had fainted at the sight of that silken bloodstained garment! The secret wish—secret, in its entire enormity, even from herself—that her mother might be thrust out of her path where she could do no more damage to Elsie had come true, and she was horrified at the realisation of that concealed desire. She had said, " You deserve to die," and by the operation of some monstrous magic her words had been literally fulfilled.

But by whose agency? Perhaps by that of the man who had heard her say those words, the man whose fury against the woman whom he held responsible was a measure of his love for herself, whom he could not hate. That fury could have no outlet against Elsie, and she knew it. She held him too securely for that. But it might have stormed its way to the surface, venting

itself on the one whom he could shatter, because before Elsie alone he was powerless.

If she had thought that, had feared, face to face with that bright jacket, that her own husband had killed her mother, no wonder, indeed, that she had fainted! It was all guesswork—or rather, an intense, concentrated effort to penetrate the innermost recesses of another person's mind and character. And yet it did account for the known facts. It would do—unless that rose-coloured thread had come from a garment belonging to Elsie Lawrence.

Peter thrust the problem aside and turned to another. Asbury's alibi—the thread—the telephone call. There it was, reduced to its lowest terms. There must be some link between those apparently unrelated facts, some common denominator. Sucking stertorously on his empty pipe, Peter tried by rephrasing the items to view them from a new angle.

A woman's lie, a woman's dress, a woman's voice. Perhaps that was the common denominator. There must be a woman at the root of it. But what woman? How many women? Mrs. Cole was a woman, of course. A woman's voice on the telephone——

Peter's pipe crashed to the floor and lay with a broken stem, surrounded by scattered ashes. But Peter did not hear it fall.

"My God!" he breathed, paying unconscious tribute of awe to the machinations of the Inscrutable Powers. "My God!" he repeated with almost incredulous gratitude. "My God!" This time the words were plain joyous swearing. "What an ass! What an egregious, braying ass I am!" But as Peter, forgetting his hat, rushed from the room, banging the door behind him, it was apparent that he did not in the least mind being an ass, that he was glad to be an ass, that he was ready to kick his heels at the world with a most resounding bray.

"She's home, she's got to be home! Nothing can stop me now," Peter informed the universe as he ran

up the steps of the brown frame house on the corner and flung himself on the door bell. "And she is!" he shouted triumphantly aloud as the door opened revealing Miss Edie Grainge.

To that young lady's astonishment, he seized both her hands and shook them ecstatically.

"Thank God you're here!" he said in greeting.

"Of course I'm here. Where else would I be? Why, it's the young man from the paper!" Edie said with surprised recognition. "Thank you ever so much for the clippings. They were just lovely. And for—for helping me out at the inquest, too," she added in some embarrassment. "Won't you come in?"

"You bet I'll come in," Peter assured her. "I always said you were a girl in a thousand. It's you that have the grand memory!" In the reaction of his spirits, Peter's ebullience found vent in a wildly exaggerated brogue.

Edie looked at him a little doubtfully, wondering if it were possible for him to be drunk at this hour of the day. Newspaper men, she had read, were a rowdy lot. Probably they were drunk at all hours.

But Peter's voice dropped to an eminently sober seriousness.

"How would you like to be the king pin, the keynote, the—all those things, in solving the Cole mystery?" he asked.

"But I thought it was all over," Edie said wonderingly.

"It isn't, but it's going to be," Peter answered cryptically. "And you're going to be the little girl that does it. You're going to get on the front page, my dear."

"Me?" Incredulous delight broke through the bewilderment in Edie's face. Peter was reminded of a neat, somewhat mature Cinderella to whom the fairy godmother had miraculously, though belatedly, appeared.

"Miss Edythe Grainge—spelled E-d-y-t-h-e—no

other," Peter assured her. "You just sit down and answer my questions and work that memory hard."

Edie obediently sat down. In fact, she was powerless to do anything else, for the back of her knees felt oddly fluid.

"You took that telephone call. But you said you had never spoken with Mrs. Cole. Are you sure of that?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure of that." Edie's voice was tremulous with excitement, but she nodded her head positively.

"Then you can't know whether it was actually Mrs. Cole's voice that you heard."

"But of course—whose else could it be?" Edie gasped.

"That isn't the point. The point is, that you heard *a* voice, but it is nothing but pure assumption that the voice was Mrs. Cole's. Now here's something else to think about. Your mother makes dresses. Tell me, have you seen around Medbury within the last month or so a dress made of stuff like this?" Peter drew the folded paper from its envelope and laid it, with its single rose-coloured thread, on the palm of Edie's hand.

Edie bent over the thread so long that Peter's hands grew cold and wet with anxiety.

"Why, yes," she said at last. "That's the new shade that just came out this summer. Mrs. Newell got a dress like that in the city, and wore it quite a lot. It's quite striking—you couldn't help noticing it. One of Mother's customers admired it and asked her to find material to match it and make a copy."

"And did she?" Peter asked.

"Not yet. Mrs. Newell's dress was an imported model, and mother hunted everywhere trying to find piece-goods to match it."

"Now think hard—and don't make a mistake. Don't say you remember if you don't. But can you by any chance recall whether you've seen Mrs. Newell wearing that dress very recently—or about how long ago it was that you last saw it?"

Edie puckered her sandy brows in concentration.

" No, I haven't seen her on the street in it so very lately, though it was quite a new dress and she wore it a lot. I think she found out that somebody was copying it, and was annoyed. She's the sort of person who can't bear seeing any one else wearing something like hers—especially if the copy was a good one and was made by a small-town dressmaker. Let me see. Mother went up to the city to hunt for the stuff——" Edie counted backward on her fingers. " I'm sure I haven't seen Mrs. Newell in that dress since Mother went—that's why I thought she'd learned about the copy and was angry. It was the very day Mother went to the city that I met Mrs. Newell on Main Street, on my way to take the night shift at the telephone exchange. It was such a hot night that she wasn't wearing any wrap. That must have been —why, that was—" Edie's voice sank to a frightened whisper—" why, that was the evening of the tenth of September!"

## CHAPTER XLVIII

It was a new Peter, a stern-faced, relentless Peter, who faced Mrs. Winifred Newell in the little bungalow living-room. The moment the door opened to his ring he had thrust his shoulder into the aperture.

" Do you remember me?" he asked.

Winnie, her fingers still clutching the door knob, dragged her eyes upward reluctantly to the face bent above her.

" I never saw you before in my life!" she said shrilly. " This is a private house. What do you mean, pushing your way in like this? If you don't go away at once I'll scream."

" Well, I thought you might recognise me," Peter said calmly. " I was sitting within five feet of you when you testified at the Cole inquest. If you scream you'll be arrested. You'll be arrested anyway, but I can give

you a load of good advice first, if you consent to put it off. I'm investigating the Cole—murder." Peter's voice dwelt on the last word with quiet emphasis.

"What do you mean by calling it a murder? It wasn't murder—the jury said it wasn't! I know you now—you're one of those newspaper reporters. You've no right to hound me like this. I said what I had to say at the inquest. I know nothing more about it. There isn't anything more to know!"

"Walk ahead of me, please, into the living-room," Peter said firmly, as if she had not spoken. "We'll put a little distance between us and that tempting door—though it wouldn't do you a bit of good to run out into the street."

Winnie's fingers dropped nervelessly from the door knob. With the stiff, mechanical movements of a sleep-walker she preceded Peter into the living-room. She continued walking until she reached the farther wall. Then she turned, her hands spread with their palms against the supporting surface.

"Sit down," said Peter, not unkindly. "I have a few questions to ask you."

Under its smooth make-up Winnie's face was pinched and strained. Make-up could not hide the new hollows under her cheek bones, the fluttering of her nostrils with each sharply indrawn breath, the apprehension that lurked in her eyes. With shaking fingers she reached for an enamelled compact that lay on the table, flipped open the lid, and dabbed the powder puff to her nose. It was a pitiable gesture of defiance; for Winnie's eyes, consulting the mirror in the lid of the compact, were wide and blind, and the powder stood out on her skin in a crazy daub.

"I have nothing whatever to say to you," she said weakly. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"It would have been easier for you if you had spared yourself all this preying suspense," Peter said gently. "You are not a real criminal. The excitement of fighting your way out held you up for a time, but you can't

go on living with the knowledge of what has happened, knowing that it is there waiting—that the past may reach out its hands at any moment. The past can't be cut off —at least not often. It reaches out into the present. Even if you were never found out it would be there always, affecting your life. It has already affected your life. It has brought you back to your husband in mortal terror. If the worst came to the worst, you wanted your husband there, to stand by you. You couldn't face it alone. Well, he probably will stand by you, if that's any comfort to you. They generally do."

"I don't—I don't know what you are talking about," Winnie said again, as if she were repeating something learned by rote.

"One thing I'm talking about is your rose-coloured crêpe silk dress—the one you wore on the night of the murder," Peter said inexorably.

"I haven't got a dress like that! I never had!" Winnie's voice rose in a thin, sharp scream.

"That's not only a lie, but an incredibly stupid lie. Dozens of people saw you wear it."

"I haven't got it, I tell you!"

"You haven't destroyed it, then. If you had you would have dared me to search for it. Doubtless there was no fireplace in your room at the boarding house, and after you came home you were afraid that your husband would wonder why you had made a fire in such hot weather. Of course you could have taken out the ashes, but blood is very hard to burn. If you threw the ashes into the garbage can, they might be found. If you buried them some one might see you, or the mark of freshly-spaded earth would waken your husband's curiosity."

"I didn't——"

"No, I don't suppose you did think of all that. You used up all your ingenuity, under the stimulus of crisis, in putting over that alibi—the alibi in which, by seeming to save Asbury, you saved yourself. That was your high point. But you haven't the criminal temperament.

You couldn't face details and think them out calmly, though, like most of us, you could rise above yourself to incredible heights of presence of mind in an emergency.

" When the emergency was over you simply didn't know what to do. As a matter of fact, it doesn't matter whether you destroyed the dress or not, because it caught in a splinter on the table leg at the ranch house, and left a thread to show that you had been there. It's too bad you didn't notice that you had torn your dress, since in that terrific clarity that sometimes comes with extreme shock you even remembered to wipe your fingerprints off the gun."

" I didn't!" Winnie gasped through stiff lips. " I didn't touch it afterwards. I just happened to have on——" A tiny bead of blood formed on her lip, as she bit it savagely, forcing herself to silence.

" Wearing gloves looks like premeditation," Peter observed.

" It wasn't," Winnie said wildly. " I always wear gloves when I go out. What am I saying? You're driving me till I don't know what I'm saying. There are hundreds of rose-coloured dresses in this town. They don't prove anything. I don't know anything about it. You know yourself that she said, ' He's killing me.' "

" Oh, no," Peter corrected her. " *You* said that. It was an inspiration born of terror and desperation—another of those soaring flights the mind rises to on occasion, and can't keep up afterward. We were all blind as bats and deaf as posts, assuming that the telephone call came through before Mrs. Cole was killed. As a matter of fact, of course, it was put in afterward. I don't suppose you were thinking clearly about implicating Asbury or any one in particular. You did not foresee what interpretation would be put on your words. You only thought that ' he ' would indicate a man as the slayer. That lack of specific intention is what made the words of the message so confusing. They were so confusing, in fact, that they kept bothering me like a sore tooth until I could figure out what they meant."

Winnie struggled to her feet and stood tottering, clinging to the arm of the chair.

"I didn't mean to do it—before God, I didn't mean to do it!" she said in a loud, toneless voice. Her eyes were fixed on Peter in abject, agonised terror. "Will they—will they—hang me?"

"No, they won't." Peter spoke with a matter-of-fact conviction that was like a restraining hand on her mounting hysteria. "They won't, because you're going to tell the truth. No matter how improbable or how damaging it may sound, you're going to tell the truth. And when you have told me the truth, I am going to help you. Sit down. Now stay there quite quietly for a minute and think it over."

When Winnie lifted her eyes again Peter knew that he had won. She no longer looked upon him as her accuser. She turned to him for aid, appealing to him for rescue from the ultimate terror.

"Take it easy," Peter cautioned. "Remember, I am going to believe what you tell me, and I cannot help you unless it is the truth."

"I never meant to lie in the first place," Winnie said dully. "But I had to. I didn't know what else to do. You remember the time I told about at the inquest, when Mrs. Cole stopped me in Mr. Asbury's car?"

Peter nodded.

"Well, I didn't tell quite all of that conversation. She told me that I'd have to stop interfering between her and Asbury. She wouldn't believe that there was nothing between us. She insisted that I should come out to the ranch, and that in her presence Asbury and I were to promise to give each other up. I couldn't make her understand that there was nothing to give up, and when I said I wouldn't go she said she would tell my husband and every one else in town that Asbury and I were having an affair. I promised to go, then. I was afraid she would make a scene on the street, and besides, I thought if all three of us were together Asbury and I

might succeed in convincing her that she was just crazy with jealousy. I think she really was crazy."

"And you went—on the night of the tenth?" Peter prompted.

"Yes—I went."

"Just a minute. How did you go? I mean, what transportation did you take?"

"I meant to take the bus that goes out that way. But I was too restless and agitated to wait, so I began walking up the highway, expecting the bus to pick me up. Before it came, however, a passing tourist gave me a lift. I walked—home—afterward——"

"Never mind about the afterward now. Just tell exactly what happened when you got there."

"Mr. Asbury wasn't there. I found afterward that he had been there earlier, but when he found out what she had made the appointment for he was furious and refused to be a party to the scene she had planned. If he had only waited for me——" Winnie's voice sank to a low moan.

"I'm afraid that considering other people's feelings isn't one of Mr. Asbury's strong points," Peter commented dryly.

"She seemed nearly frantic. She had the gun in her hands, and she threatened to kill me if I wouldn't give Asbury back to her. She kept shrieking that I had taken him away from her, that he had left her that night to go to me, but that he was hers and no other woman living should have him. I suppose, if I'd been wise, I'd have admitted her accusations and given her the promise she wanted. But I didn't think of that. I just kept insisting that I wasn't responsible for Mr. Asbury's actions and that there wasn't and never had been an affair between us. I was frightened, but I was angry, too. At last I said that Asbury was tired of her long before he ever met me. At that—she turned the gun—straight at me——" Winnie covered her face with her hands, her whole frame shaking in an uncontrollable shudder.

Peter's firm, cool fingers closed over her clutching hands and dragged them down.

" Steady on," he said gently. " You'll have to go on, but it will be over in a minute."

Winnie's hands clung to Peter's with a grip that made him wince.

" I grabbed the gun. I was too scared to know what was happening, except that I must get the gun pointed away from my face. I'm a much larger woman than Mrs. Cole, but she seemed terribly strong. Those marks they found on her arms—I must have made them while we were struggling. At last I forced her down. I don't know anything about trajectories and all that. I only know that there was an awful sound, almost in my ear. It sent me reeling back, and I saw—her."

" It's all right, my dear, it's all right, it's all over." Peter crooned the senseless phrases over and over until the staring eyes focused again and the form huddled in the chair shook less violently.

" After that," Winnie went on through chattering teeth, " it seemed as if the room had frozen into a solid, clear cake of ice—it was like something you see through glass. I didn't feel anything—not anything at all. I didn't even mind the blood that was streaming down my dress. Dark it was, darker than blood, against the rose colour. It wasn't I that was standing there. It was like watching somebody on the stage—somebody with whom you have nothing to do.

" I heard the gun clatter to the floor, and I watched my arm coming forward, so I knew that I must have flung it from me. Then I put all the furniture back into place. I noticed that there were dents in the linoleum where the legs of chairs and table had stood, and I fitted them back into the dents. I stooped to pick up the stick I had grabbed out of the wood-box when Mrs. Cole first turned on me with the gun, but I saw that it was covered with blood, and I didn't touch it. I didn't mind the blood on my dress, yet my fingers withdrew and wouldn't pick up the stick.

" I walked over to the telephone and picked up the receiver. I didn't think about finger-prints at all. But I still had on my gloves, and Mrs. Cole's prints must have been left on the receiver from the last time she used it. I think I had some vague idea of telephoning to the police. I swear I had no conception of what I was going to say until I heard the words. It was as if there was a phonograph in my mind and I was listening to the record. I set down the instrument, with the receiver still in my hand. Then I heard the sound of a car stopping just outside.

" That sound woke me up out of that queer icy trance. I dropped the receiver and dashed to the china closet. I heard some one at the front door, and then steps coming around the house. Then the screen door opened and banged shut again. I knew that someone else was in the room. I stood there in the china closet—I don't think I even breathed. Finally the screen door opened and shut again. I stayed there a long time waiting, not sure."

" That must have been Mr. Cole. But it couldn't have been very long, really," Peter said.

" Perhaps not. I don't know. I ran out at last, and down the road. The sheriff's car passed me on the way in, but I shrank back off the highway, and they didn't notice. I came into town by the back streets, where there are plenty of trees and not much light. I wasn't consciously thinking of my dress, but of course if I'd met any one under a street lamp they'd have been sure to see the blood. Only I didn't meet any one. It was just luck."

" Sheer accident," Peter nodded. " You've got to leave plenty of room for accident in this world. So many things that you couldn't possibly plan for just—happen."

" Afterward, when they arrested Mr. Asbury," Winnie went on in a dead voice, " I didn't know just what to do. It seemed astonishing at first that nobody connected me with Mrs. Cole and the ranch house at all.

I kept expecting they would. And then I thought that I could make things safe for Mr. Asbury and for myself as well if I said that we had both been in Medbury together at the time Mrs. Cole—died. He'd have to uphold me in it for his own sake."

"And now, my dear," Peter said after a pause, "you'll have to face the music. I could have laid my evidence before the district attorney and had you arraigned. But it will create a much better impression for you to give yourself up as if you did it of your own will."

Terror leaped again like a flame in Winnie's eyes.

"But you said—they wouldn't—they won't——" She could not say the fearful word. Her throat was dry, as if it were lined with ashes.

"You'll get a manslaughter verdict, at the outside. Perhaps, with a good jury, it may even be justifiable homicide. The bandage on the eyes of justice has a way of slipping a bit where a pretty woman is concerned."

Winnie shook her head wearily.

"I don't understand all those words," she said.

"Well," Peter explained, "at the very worst, you may have to lay away all your pretty clothes and go to prison for a bit."

"Oh—clothes!" Winnie's voice was charged with weary scorn.

"Now don't you go getting contemptuous about clothes. You'll need all your prettiest ones for the trial," Peter said. "I believe every word that you've told me, and with a good lawyer we'll have the jury believing it, too. It'll be a great trial, and Peter Piper's going to cover it—and don't imagine that juries virtuously keep their eyes turned away from the newspapers while they're trying a case, because they don't. With all due modesty, it's not going to hurt one little bit to have Peter Piper and the *Herald* gunning for you."

Peter's banter was rewarded by a faint flush of returning colour in Winnie's face, stark white beyond the rouged circles on her cheeks.

" I'm ready any time," she said, a new steadiness in her voice.

" I'll go with you to the district attorney's office—it may make things easier," Peter said.

" You know, it's a great relief—you'll never know how much——"

" I think I do," Peter said earnestly. " It's the best thing you could possibly do. Now, doll yourself up a bit, and we'll be off."

With fingers that still trembled. Winnie felt for her compact. As the lid sprang open she seized the powder puff and turned an accusing gaze on Peter.

" Oh!" she said. " Why didn't you tell me that I had an awful patch of powder showing on my nose all this time?"

## CHAPTER XLIX

" CLEAR the front page for me, I'm coming! Say, Jimmy, that's like the slogans the generals get off about their battles in order to be sure of direct quotation in the history books. ' We have met the enemy and they are ours '—that sort of thing." Peter leaned far back in his chair, the telephone instrument pressed against his chest. His voice was jubilant. But Jimmy's voice, coming raucously over the long-distance wire, was unresponsive to Peter's elation.

" Hell's bells, Peter, you waked me up out of my first sleep. If you're sober, say what you have to say and get through with it. If you're drunk, ring off."

" Oh no, old dear, I'm not going to tell about it till I get there. I'm all rejoiced at the thought of leaving you to sweat while I drive through the night, allee samee Paul Revere. As for ringing off, the *Herald* is going to pay the tolls on this long-distance call and anything else I put into the little old swindle sheet. 'Cause why? 'Cause Mrs. Cole got murdered, she did, and I've escorted the person that did it to the D.A.'s office to

make a complete statement, and it's going to be one whale of a trial, and the story's going to break exclusively in the *Herald* to-morrow morning." Peter paused in his baiting long enough to catch his breath, grinning exultantly over the top of the telephone mouthpiece.

"My—Aunt—Maria!" Peter was gratified to hear the words of Jimmy's mightiest oath, reserved for crucial occasions: "Who did it? How soon can you get here?"

"You'd never guess. Say, Jerry and Allison are coming up on the night train. They didn't wait for me, because I didn't know how long I'd be held in the D.A.'s office. They're going to get married. Allison will stay with Barbara till they get their licence, and that's as soon as the marriage licence bureau opens in the morning. It'd be nice if you gave Jerry a week off on pay, Jimmy," Peter wheedled.

"I don't give a hoot in hell if the Angel Gabriel's getting married! Sure, I'll give him a week off if you'll answer my question—and I'll give you the rest of your life off if you don't. When will you get here?" Jimmy fumed.

"'Let not your angry passions rise.' Jimmy, I've been low, very low, but I'm not low any more. You ought to be glad of that. I'll get there as fast as Bossy will bring me. Suppose you meet me at the office at 1 a.m. There won't be any traffic to speak of, this time of night, and I ought to make it by then. I haven't got a line of the story written yet, and believe me, it's going to be a spread. Meanwhile, you just put all your guesses in a sealed envelope, and I'll bet you two bits every one of 'em's wrong. And say, Jimmy!"

"Yes." Jimmy gave up the futile attempt to stem the torrent of Peter's boisterous spirits.

"It's a lucky thing you've already had a first sleep to be wakened out of, because for this night that's all there is—there isn't—any—more." Drawling the last words with elaborate nonchalance, Peter hung up the receiver.

It was a pale, dishevelled, but grinning Peter who grabbed a "City Edition" from under the arm of a laden copy boy at nine o'clock the following morning. On the street corner far below he could hear the newsboys yelling, "Extra! Extra!" The rest was indistinguishable, but Peter did not need the aid of his ears to tell him the meaning of that confused shouting.

Peter spread the front page of the *Herald* before him. Almost the entire upper half was a pattern of huge black headlines. He looked down at it with the rapt gaze of a father beholding for the first time the face of his newborn infant. He flipped the page. A good lay-out. A six-column cut, with Mrs. Winifred Newell in the centre, flanked by Mrs. Cole, Edie Grainge, and the ranch house in an inset. He had had to fight hard to get in Edie Grainge, but he'd done it. And on Page One, under tier upon tier of "banks," his by-line, "By Peter Piper," with the parenthetical rider, "Copyright by the *Evening Herald*."

Peter grinned. He had never had a story copyrighted before, but that was not the source of his satisfaction. Peter had been christened James Aloysius, and he had been trying hard ever since to live it down. He had never succeeded in reducing it officially beyond a mere "J. A.," though to the composing room, as to every one else, he was known as Peter. It hadn't seemed quite respectful to his well-meaning but culpable parents to change it of his own volition, but the compositor, in the rush of remaking the entire paper at the eleventh hour, had done it for him. There it was, "By Peter Piper." He was christened in black smudges of printers' ink, on the front page of the *Herald*. Nobody would ever dare bring up that "James Aloysius" again.

Agnew, the rewrite man, strolled across the room and stood leaning over Peter's shoulder.

"We sure cleaned up on 'em that time," Peter murmured, looking up. "Won't the *Telegram* and the *Journal* just naturally claw the air when they see it?"

"'We!'" Agnew snorted. "Where do you get that

stuff? Who do you think you are—Colonel Lindbergh? It's the biggest beat since the Leopold-Loeb case. I shouldn't wonder if you got the Pulitzer Prize for it."

"Don't be silly," Peter retorted impolitely.

"Piper!"

Peter sidled over to the city desk and waited expectantly, like a dog hoping for a bone.

"I suppose you'd like me to tell you it's a good yarn," Jimmy grunted.

Peter flushed.

"Well," he stammered, "I—I thought myself it was a pretty fair story. Of course I didn't have much time to dress it up."

"It *is* a good yarn, since you insist," Jimmy went on. "It's such a good yarn, in fact, that the Big Chief has just O.K.'d an order for a hundred dollar bonus for you. Here it is."

Peter balanced the envelope in his hand, tilting it back and forth.

"See here, Jimmy," he said at last, "you're going to give Jerry Dean that chance in the main office, aren't you?"

"Since you seem carried away with the idea that his marriage and future life and your own continued usefulness depend on it, I guess I'll have to."

"Well, you know, he's a good kid. We'd never have got this story if he hadn't known the population of Medbury backward and forward, the way a society dame knows the social register. He's the one that really deserves this bonus, and it would give him a tremendous boost. Sort of put self-confidence in him, when he's just getting started, and all. Suppose you turn it over to him, without saying a word about having offered it to me first."

Jimmy jerked at his eye-shade till it was thrust steeply upward from the top of his head.

"Well, I'm damned!" he murmured. "I'm—certainly—damned. And he thinks he's hard-boiled!"

Peter had laid the envelope on the city editor's desk

and ambled away, hunching his shoulders. The sound of his doleful whistle wailed through the air.

"For God's sake, somebody put the cat out!" the water-front man said bitterly. "This place has been a little bit of heaven with you away, Peter. It'll be an act of philanthropy if we stage an out-of-town murder every once in a while just to protect our sanity."

Peter dexterously twirled a spill of copy paper and sent it whizzing past the ear of the water-front man. Then he wandered back to the city desk.

"I say, Jimmy, I know you said I had to be back on the job to-day, and here I am. But I forgot to eat any dinner last night, and I haven't had time for breakfast yet. Do you suppose I could take half an hour off and go somewhere for a feed?"

"You can go to hell and eat fried onions—and do it on the house," Jimmy answered. "And I say, Peter!"

"Yes?"

"You're such a cynical, hard-boiled guy that I think I ought to warn you. We'll want to go heavy on the heart interest—the sweet young thing, and repentance, and all that, at the trial. Don't be too hard on the dame with the gun." Jimmie eyed Peter sternly, allowing not the slightest hint of a smile to break through his expression of ponderous gravity.

"Sure."

"And, Peter!"

Peter turned again to the city desk.

"It's a clean beat—a knockout. The *Journal* and the *Telegram* are feeling sick about now. The *Herald* got 'em in the ribs that time. We sure did it with our little hatchet."

Peter's long face shone with gratification.

"Hoo-oo-oo, hoo-oo-oo-oo," whistled Peter very loudly, as he strolled to the elevator.

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## NEW 7/6 DETECTIVE NOVELS

### FRANCIS D. GRIERSON
Author of *The Yellow Rat*, etc.

# THE LADY OF DESPAIR

IT was in a sordid Apache case that Geoffrey first saw her—the Lady of Despair, beautiful ward of Paul Daburon, the famous advocate. If he did not actually fall in love with her there and then Geoffrey Barsette was certainly more than a little interested. His luck was in. That very night he made a good friend of Inspector Patras, by rescuing him from a skirmish with two Apaches from the Parisian underworld, into which his duties as detective had led him. M. Patras needed no introduction to Barsette, the author of many thrilling mystery stories. He was able to tell him all about Madelon Marly, the mysterious society beauty whose charm had attracted a number of suitors, each of whom had—was it by unhappy coincidence?—met a sudden death in the very moment when their love seemed about to be returned. A few days later the Vicomte de Caramie, the latest aspirant to Madelon's hand, and already a rival of Geoffrey, was found in his apartment murdered, with a fencing foil through his heart!

### HULBERT FOOTNER
Author of *The Under Dogs*, etc.

# THE VIPER

PARIS! Paris in June! Paris under the night sky! Dejeuner in the Bois; dinner on Montmarte; ices, and *such* ices, any time of the day or night, at the Cafe de la Paix, the centre of the world. No wonder Miss Brickley, secretary to the famous woman detective, Madame Storey, was thrilled at the prospect of accompanying her employer. It ought to have been a vacation trip, but turned out to be something more strenuous. Almost too strenuous, in fact, but Miss Brickley at any rate came near blessing the little widow who had asked Madame Storey to investigate the mysterious death of her millionaire husband. Here are new exploits of the famous Madame Storey in a new setting, revealing her more fascinating, more ingenious than ever.

## NEW 7/6 DETECTIVE NOVELS

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# THE HARDWAY DIAMONDS MYSTERY

ON a night of fog Pussy Herridge stole the Hardway diamonds—and on the same night they were restolen. It was a grim trail that Dick Penhampton followed which led him to discover one of them on a dead man in the marshes. Who was the Funny Toff, the terror alike of police and criminals, the unknown man with such amazing resource and ingenuity, a devilish, perverted sense of humour, and a lunatic laugh that few heard twice? Death was the answer meted out to all who tried to solve the riddle—to all except Dick Penhampton. Why was he spared so often by his unknown adversary in that ghastly game of cat-and-mouse played out in the dark? Was Inspector Pollard entirely deluded when he turned his attention to trailing the trailer? Or was Alison Weatherleigh's faith in her lover justified?

### VIRGIL MARKHAM

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HERE is a super-thriller, with an unusual plot, unusual style and unusual atmosphere! It is the sort of book which one literally cannot put down because of the ingenuity of its plot and because its most incredible passages become convincing through the genius of the author's logic and style. It has for its setting a grim castle in the Welsh mountains—the sort of place where anything might happen. And something does! Sir Anthony has a voice that possesses the spell of the mountains themselves—a hypnotic voice that has conquered the beautiful girl Arthura. There is death in Kestrel's Eyrie, mysterious death that shocks!

## NEW 7/6 DETECTIVE NOVELS

## Philip MacDonald

Author of *Likeness of Exe*, *Patrol*, etc.

# THE NOOSE

ANTHONY GETHRYN is recalled hurriedly from Sunny Spain to solve a murder mystery in the November fogs of London. He finds that his wife is sheltering Mrs. Bronson, whose husband at that moment is in prison, awaiting the hangman's noose, convicted of the murder of a gamekeeper six months before. A petition for a reprieve has gone up and been rejected. In ten days Bronson will hang for some one else's crime! How did Gethryn know the man was innocent? Simply because Mrs. Bronson told him so; which seems absurd —till you know Mrs. Bronson! And how did he set about the impossible task of proving the man's innocence and another man's guilt of a six months' old crime—all in ten days?

## Willard K. Smith

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